Thunder Over Washington by William P. McGivern

fantastic

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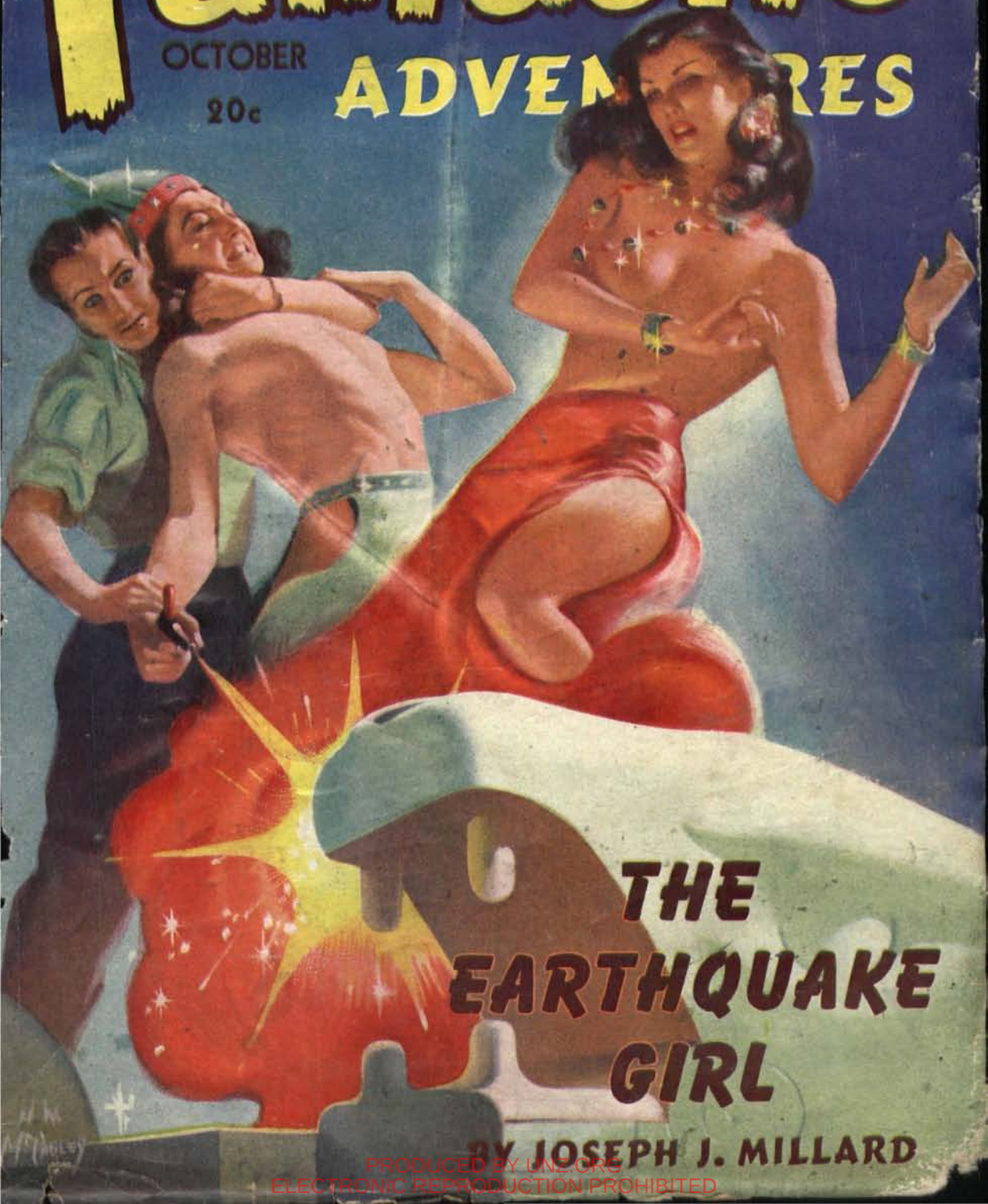

THE EARTHQUAKE GIRL

BY JOSEPH J. MILLARD

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[AN ADVERTISEMENT TO MEN]

Cut him loose and let him go

No matter what other good points he may have, a man who is guilty of halitosis (bad breath) is likely to be dropped in a hurry by fastidious women—and deservedly.

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VOL. 3
NO. 8

Fantastic ADVENTURES

TRADE MARK REGISTERED

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Cover painting by H. W. McCauley, illustrating a scene from "The Earthquake Girl."
Illustrations by H. W. McCauley; Jay Jackson; Magarian; Rod Ruth; Robert Fuqua.
Cartoons by Robert W. Glueckstein; R. Newman & Hallack McCord.

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ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY
608 South Dearborn St., Chicago, Ill.

William B. Ziff, Publisher; B. G. Davis, Editor; Raymond A. Palmer, Managing Editor;
Herman R. Bollin, Art Director; H. G. Strong, Circulation Manager.

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FANTASTIC ADVENTURES OCTOBER, 1941

FANTASTIC ADVENTURES is published monthly by ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY at 608 South Dearborn Street, Chicago, Ill. New York office 270 Madison Avenue. Entered as second class matter April 16, 1940, at the Post Office, Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3rd, 1879. Subscription $2.40 a year (12 issues); Canada, $2.90; Foreign, $3.40. Subscribers should allow at least two weeks for change of address. All communications about subscriptions should be addressed to the Director of Circulation, 608 South Dearborn St., Chicago, Ill.

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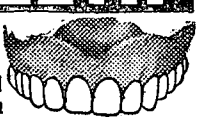

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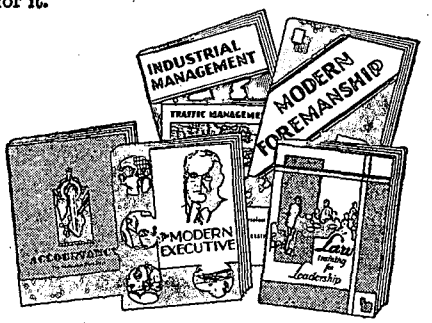

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The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

ONCE again we are chuckling as you turn to this page to begin reading—because already we know that you're sold on this issue, after one long look at the latest Mac Girl cover by McCauley, the Petty of the Pulps.

So from here on in, the rest is simply a matter of bowing beneath the plaudits of the many thousands of our readers.

But frankly, your editors think this latest Mac Girl is just about as easy on the eyes as anything we've seen in or around Chicago so far. And by that we mean exactly that—this girl is *real!* She is one of Chicago's most popular entertainers, who glamor-socks the boys at the swanky Rhumba Casino every night along with Tito Guizar.

Now if Mac would only let *us* meet her!

OH, you think we haven't anything to sell but a cover, this issue, eh? Well, when you've finished the stories this month, you'll have read something really grand, we promise you.

Take "The Earthquake Girl" by Joseph J. Millard, for instance. Now there's a yarn about Central America that reminds us of Major S. P. Meek's "Troyana" stories a long time ago. But with a modern pace that makes for some of the fastest reading you've had in a long time.

BUT we think the treat of the issue is William P. McGivern's short story, "Tink Takes A Hand." We say this is real fantasy, and worthy of any short story collection, fantasy or not! And if you have any Irish blood in you, we know we won't have to back down on that statement. If enough Irishmen read this, they'll never *make* us back down!

NOR does John York Cabot have to take a back seat with his short yarn, "The Truthful Liar." If you'll remember, it was Cabot who broke in with us with his now famous "Man The World Forgot." It seems that Cabot has one reputation nobody can equal, and that is for idea-stories. We advise you not to miss this story.

OKAY, you guys who are anti-trust and anti-monopoly—maybe William P. McGivern *has* two stories in this issue. But the nation's number two writer is worth it when he brings two such yarns in our office as these! "Thunder Over Washington" is one we know you'll like. It's about a rather famous hammer.

IF you haven't seen the October issue of our companion magazine, *Amazing Stories*, then you'll be wondering about our mention above of the nation's number two writer. Well, we took a poll of several thousand readers' comments and discovered that the ten most liked authors were (in order): 1, Don Wilcox; 2, William P. McGivern; 3, John York Cabot; 4, Nelson S. Bond; 5, David Wright O'Brien; 6, James Norman; 7, Edgar Rice Burroughs; 8, Robert Moore Williams; 9, David V. Reed; 10, Eando Binder. Which is worth mentioning again! When you see any of those names heading a story—it's good! And you can take your own word for it, because that's where the list comes from.

YOU'LL notice Rod Ruth has some very fine illustrations in this issue. He's going to be back more often from now on. His cover for "The Return of Circe" was so well received that he is now working on two more, one to illustrate a story by David V. Reed, for *Amazing Stories*, and another for you FANTASTIC readers for a new author to our pages—but a good one.

Rod, you know, is the artist who has been doing such a marvelous job on "Romance of the Elements" these many months.

(Concluded on page 93)

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ADVERTISEMENT

DO WE HAVE TO DIE?

Is there a Power within that can give Health, Youth, Happiness, Success?

Can we cast off all fear, negation, failure, worry, poverty and disease? Can we reach those mental and spiritual heights which at present appear unattainable? To these eternal questions, the answers given by Edwin J. Dingle, Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, are unusual. He reveals the story of a remarkable system of mind and body control that often leads to almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind, achievement of business and professional success, and new happiness. Many report improvement in health. Others tell of magnetic personality, courage and poise.

The method was found in remote and mysterious Tibet, formerly a forbidden country, rarely visited by outsiders, and often called the land of miracles in the astounding books written about it. Here, behind the highest mountains in the world, Mr. Dingle learned the extraordinary system he is now disclosing to the Western World.

He maintains that all of us are giants in strength and mind-power, capable of surprising feats. From childhood, however, we are hypnotized, our powers put to sleep, by the suggestions of associates, by what we read, and by various other

experiences. To realize their really marvelous powers, men and women must escape from this hypnotism. The method found by Mr. Dingle in Tibet is said to be remarkably instrumental in freeing the mind of the hypnotizing ideas that paralyze the giant powers within us.

A nine-thousand word treatise revealing many startling results of this system is now being offered by the Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. 39E, Los Angeles, Calif. They offer to send it free to any readers who quickly send their names and addresses. Readers are urged to write them promptly, as only a limited number of the free treatises have been printed.

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by Joseph J. Millard

What was causing those earthquakes deep in Central America? Markham flew down to find out—and ran into an incredible ageless race

"THERE it comes again!" Steve Markham exclaimed. "Can't you hear it—*feel* it?"

His secretary, prim, efficient and more than a little frightened, avoided his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Professor Markham, but it's like all the other days. I—I can't hear a thing."

"Good Lord, you must be deaf!"

An expression of irritation crossed his square-set, handsome face. He pressed hands to his ears, wincing.

"That droning—it's coming from the air, the desk, the walls . . . everything's humming like a tuning fork."

He glanced up at the electric clock.

"Exactly the same as last week," he muttered. "Begins at three minutes to eleven, reaches maximum at eleven and dies away at three minutes past eleven. First once a month, then once every two weeks, now every week. If that goes on—"

He broke off, staring at his secretary's averted face.

"You think I'm crazy, don't you? But I tell—"

The shrill whirr of the telephone interrupted him. His secretary answered, listened for a moment without comment and then hung up.

"A call from the seismographic labora . . ."

"Don't tell me," Steve Markham interrupted. "I'll tell *you!* The seisomograph has just recorded another earthquake of six-minute duration, apparently centered somewhere about twenty-five hundred miles southwest of here."

She nodded wordlessly.

With an exclamation of determination, Markham snatched a bulky file folder from his desk.

"I'll make that idiot of a Dean Raymond listen to me this time if I have to grab his goatee and ram a seismograph down his dried-up throat."

He slapped open the hall door with an athletic violence that shook the room, pounded purposefully out into

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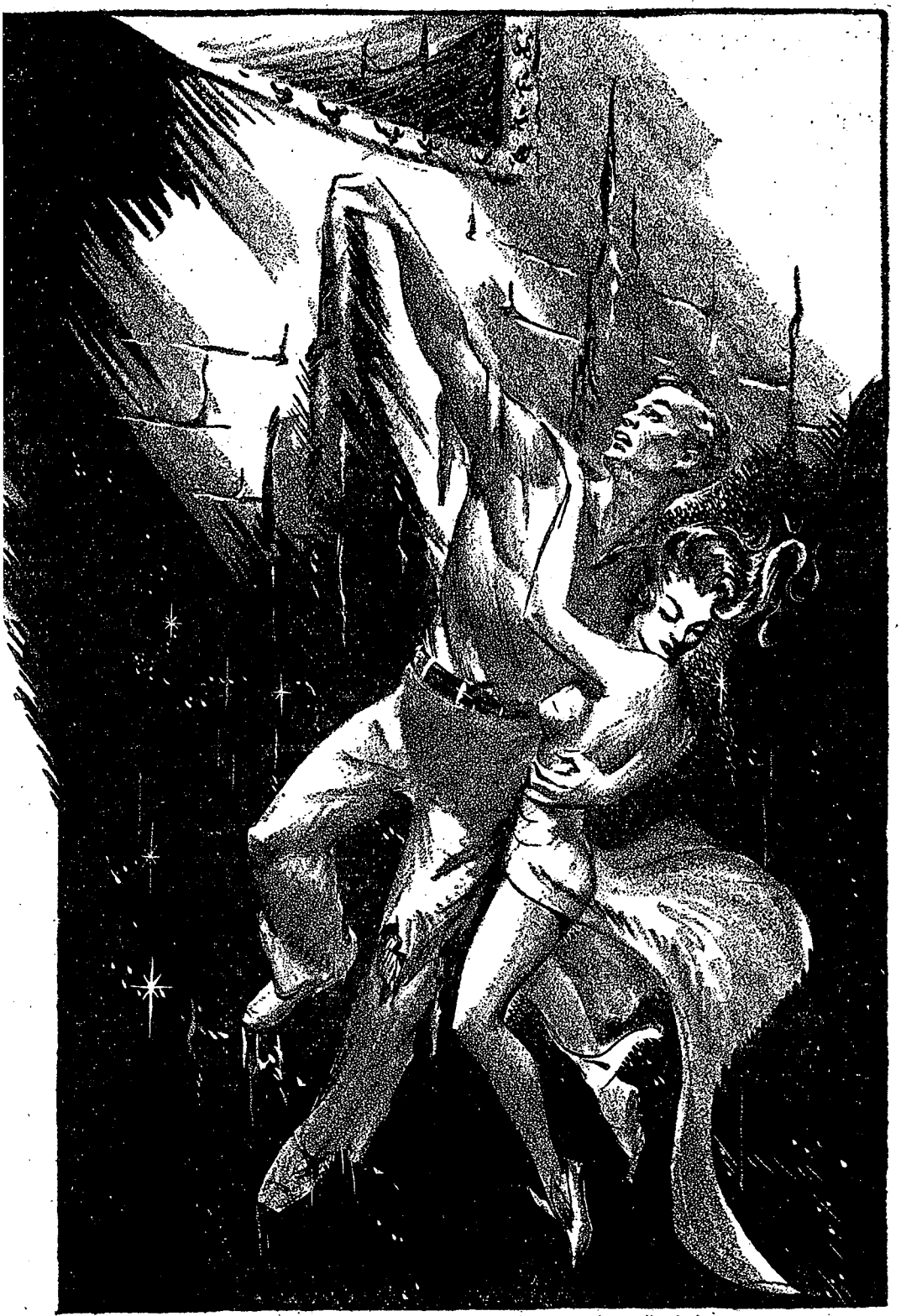

Markham clung desperately to the little knob on the wall of the pit

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the corridor. He took the old stairs of the Geology Building of Gaylor University three at a time.

AT a door labeled CARVER S. RAYMOND, M.S., DEAN OF THE DEPARTMENT OF GEOLOGY, he turned and plunged through at full speed. A thin, spectacled girl looked up at his stormy entrance. Recognition flashed in her eyes. With a bound she was up from her desk, barring the closed inner door. Steve Markham brought up short before her, growling.

"Wait, Professor Markham," she panted. "Please! You *can't* go in there now. Dean Raymond left positive orders that he wasn't to be disturbed for anything this morn . . ."

"I know," Markham said. "He left orders that if that crackpot Markham showed up, to kick him out. Well, sister, I've been kicked out for the last time. *I'm going in!* Raymond is not only going to see me but he's going to *listen* to me this time. Step aside and let me—"

The door suddenly opened behind the girl's fluttering figure.

"I will be glad to listen, Professor Markham," Dean Raymond said coldly from the opening. "As a matter of fact, I was considering bringing this entire disgraceful matter to a head today. Come in."

If the weazened scientist expected his young assistant to wilt, he was disappointed. Markham bowed shortly and strode into the Dean's inner office. He slapped the bulky file folder down on the immaculate desk, jerked a chair to position beside it and sat down.

"Now, Markham," Dean Raymond began, perching on his padded swivel chair behind the desk. "Let's have this out. From a mere nuisance, Sir, you have rapidly graduated to a position of actual menace to the dignity of this great institution of learning.

"Originally, you were given the post of Associate Professorship here because of your unexcelled scholastic record. Frankly, I opposed your appointment at that time on the grounds that you were too imaginative for a calm scientific delineation of natural phenomena. It appears that I was right."

Steve Markham controlled his anger with a visible effort.

"Dean Raymond, I have only one request. Give me ten uninterrupted minutes in which to tell you and *show* you what I have found out. If, by that time, I haven't convinced you that there is great danger," he spread his hands in a gesture of resignation, "then I shall bow to your decision."

"Granted!" Raymond snapped curtly and glanced significantly at his watch.

MARKHAM knew Raymond well enough to know that the ten minutes of armistice was an inflexible unit of time. Ten minutes and not one second more. Nevertheless, he used one precious minute to marshal his story into graphic form. Then he plunged into his recital.

"You know that my chief interest lies in the field of earthquakes," he began. "Pursuing my studies, I set out to collect and analyze reports of tremors and quakes from all parts of the world, as far back into history as possible. In this file, for example, are newspaper clippings of all reported quakes during the past ten years."

"Newspapers," Raymond interposed dryly, "are not generally considered reliable sources of scientific data."

Markham ignored the jibe.

"Out of that study rose two significant mysteries. In fact, they positively *cry* out for attention and study. One

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of these is the matter of earthquakes that never occur. Our own seismograph, and all others as well, repeatedly records hundreds of quakes of destructive intensity that simply never happen. Their location is accurately placed. We wait breathlessly for a report of destruction and death, for often our figures place the tremor in the midst of a densely populated area.

"But no report ever comes. Why? What unknown force could activate our seismographs so violently, yet not even be felt at its point of origin?"

Dean Raymond stirred uneasily, opened his mouth and closed it again without speaking. Markham opened his file folder, snatched out a small newspaper clipping.

"Here is a clipping dated July 15, 1940. It appeared in nearly every newspaper in the country, reporting Fordham University's record of a quake of sufficient intensity to cause considerable damage. The origin of the quake was definitely placed in the region of the Aleutian Islands. But inhabitants of those islands have reported neither destruction nor even mild shocks."

He exchanged that clipping for a second one and rushed on.

"Here is a sample of the second mystery. A few days after the so-called Aleutian quake, there was a mild one felt in California. *But*—that quake was preceded by a loud droning or roaring noise—"

"Where is the mystery in that?" Raymond demanded sharply. "Shifting rocks cause earthquakes, and shifting rocks can also cause a roaring sound."

"Ah!" Markham cried triumphantly. "But have you ever figured the interval of time between the roaring noise and the quake itself? Have you ever calculated the speed of sound waves and the speed of the shock waves themselves to discover how far away such slipping rocks would have to be for such elapsed time? I have. I have computed the time intervals for twenty-three different quakes and I have figures here that—"

RAYMOND waved his hand irritably. "Never mind. I'll take your word for the computations. You have exactly five and a quarter minutes in which to finish, Professor Markham."

"All right. Now, the third and perhaps the linking mystery—my own physical peculiarity. You will recall that six months ago I told you I could feel a queer, ominous vibration in the air—a droning that was more of a feeling than a sound. You will also remember that I reported the same sensation once a month, then once every two weeks and, finally, once a week. Always at exactly the same hour of the day. The sound, or feeling, lasted exactly six minutes.

"Then came my own discovery that every time I felt the vibration, our seismograph recorded a quake of the same duration at the same time. Each of these quakes is more severe than the preceding one. And every quake centers in an unexplored region of the Sierra Madre Mountains, in the state of Sinaloa, in western Mexico."

Markham paused, bent forward with his clenched fists pressed tight against the desk.

"Such regularity as that can't be natural. There is something happening down there in Sinaloa that we've got to investigate. The quakes themselves haven't yet reached destructive intensity but that regularity of recurrence could be a hundred times worse. You know how a tuning fork of the right vibration can shatter a glass tumbler. What if those weird vibrations I feel

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and the seismograph records should happen to hit a vibrational period of just the proper length. They might shatter layers of vital rock strata and set that whole mountain chain to shaking.

"Somehow, some *one* or some *thing* is causing those regular vibrations for a definite purpose. And it can't be an innocent purpose. Imagine New York City, here, rocked by a terrific, artificially induced earthquake—"

"Ten minutes!" Raymond interrupted.

He snapped his watch shut. Then he leaned forward, put sharp elbows on the desk and pressed the tips of his fingers together.

"Now, Markham, you cannot say that you have been denied a fair and impartial hearing. I have listened carefully without interrupting. Now what I have to say to you will not require anything like ten minutes."

Steve Markham's breath went out in a long, gusty sigh.

"YOUR story, Markham, is interesting. I might even say exciting. Between the lurid covers of one of those hideous dime novels, it should find a ready welcome. But scientifically, it is based on nothing more stable than misconceptions and a gross disregard of the true facts.

"Certainly it is a rare phenomenon when earthquakes occur at such regular intervals. But the region you refer to is a logical breeding place for earth tremblers and a little rational thought should show you beyond any dobut that the effect of expansion and contraction of rocks under tropical sunlight is responsible for the apparently artificial regularity of the shocks."

"But not for the constantly shortening periods," Markham burst out desperately. "And how can sunlight effect basic strata, far underground?"

"Professor Markham," Raymond continued bitingly, "I believe your interest in earthquakes dates from the time your parents were unfortunately killed in a violent earthquake disaster, does it not?"

"Yes—"

"Another thing. Until a year ago, you did a great deal of flying, did you not? If I remember correctly, you were a licensed private airplane pilot and owned, or still own, a plane."

Markham's lips drew to a tight line. His affirmation was no more than a nod as Raymond drove relentlessly on.

"A year ago, you were involved in a plane crash in which your passenger was killed. You, I believe, suffered no more than a head injury that effected your hearing for a time. Although you were absolved of all blame for the crash, you have never piloted nor ridden in a plane since that accident—"

"Damn you!" Steve Markham roared, jerking to his feet so violently that his chair crashed over backward. "I know what you're driving at. You're trying to prove that losing my folks in a quake affected my mind—made me a little bit cracked on the subject of earthquakes—and that the plane crash affected my hearing so that the droning I reported is nothing more than head noises of the kind that bother so many deaf persons."

"Please. Professor, control yourself. If I were to report this unseemly conduct to the Board of Regents—"

"Report and be damned!" Markham shouted hoarsely, all caution swept away in a surge of raging anger. "You dried-up prune with a Portland cement brain. You call yourself a scientist! Why, a few years ago, you'd be throwing stones at Galileo and calling Kepler a crackpot. Report and be damned! Something threatens to blast the earth

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apart under your supercilious nose and you haven't the brains to investigate—even for the personal satisfaction of proving that I *am* a nut!"

He snatched up his file folder and whirled away from the gasping, purple-faced savant. At the door he turned.

"By godfrey, I'll do this job myself!"

He slammed the door behind him furiously and stalked down the corridor in purposeful fury.

STILL boiling, Steve Markham went back to his own quarters. Grim-jawed and sultry-eyed, he strode toward his office, blind to everything but the maelstrom of emotions in his brain. His secretary sprang up to intercept him.

"Professor, this man has been waiting to see you. His name is Smith. He wants to ask you something about earthquakes if you have a few minutes to spare."

Markham turned impatiently with the idea of brusquely dismissing his caller. He had no stomach for visiting or for detailed discussion of abstract theories.

The man rose from the visitor's chair, smiling diffidently. The words of dismissal died on Markham's lips. Something like an electric shock tingled along his nerve ends at the sight of the man named Smith.

It wasn't merely the man's physical appearance, although that was, in itself, enough to command attention. He was well over six feet tall and incredibly lean, with a dry, inhuman leanness that made Markham think of an Egyptian mummy. His face, thin and hawk-nosed, had a foreign look, yet not one that Markham could readily couple with any known nationality.

More startling was the fleeting impression that, as Smith rose from the chair, his whole body momentarily *shimmered*. It was almost as though Markham were viewing him through a veil of rising heat waves.

"Professor Markham," Smith's voice, too, was odd in its almost metallic timbre, its queer, precise intonation, as though reciting memorized words in an unfamiliar tongue, "I will take no more than a few of your valuable minutes. But my mission is one whose vital importance I feel sure you will quickly appreciate."

With an effort, Markham shook off a queer feeling of uneasy fear. He forced a welcoming smile and extended his hand.

"Glad to know you. If you'll step into my office—"

Smith shrank back, an odd alarm in his piercing black eyes.

"No—no! I cannot shake hands. My own hand—I have hurt it. So sorry—"

Markham frowned, turned to his secretary.

"Dig out all my personal papers and my files of earthquake data right away." He saw the questioning look in her eyes. "Yep! I'm through—fired. Get that stuff together fast, will you? I'm leaving as soon as I finish with Smith."

The lean, dark-skinned Smith let Markham open the door. Then he followed into the private office. He took the chair Markham indicated, but although it was placed at an awkward angle, he made no move to straighten it.

"Now," Markham said, erasing his frown as he slid into his own chair. "What can I do for you? You told my secretary it was something about earthquakes, I believe."

"Yes," Smith bent forward, his black eyes peering eagerly. "Tell me, Mister Markham, have you kept records of recent successive earth shocks that recur with almost artificial regularity?"

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MARKHAM suppressed a start of surprise. How could this stranger know of his work?

"I *have* been noticing an odd coincidence," he admitted finally, keeping his face blank.

"Ah-h-h!" A sigh of relief, a quick exhalation of the visitor's breath. "It has been so long—so disheartening. But at last, of all the scientists I have visited, at last I find one. It is well."

Suddenly Markham stiffened. The hair on his scalp began, unaccountably, to crawl. There it was again. Weirdly, oddly, unmistakably, the body of the stranger was shimmering, seeming enveloped in wavy unreality, as though existing in a curtain of crawling heat waves. The sensation grew, and Markham reeled dizzily.

He strove to tear his eyes away from the incredible spectacle. His fingers dug into the arms of the chair until he could hear the knuckles crack. Terror—a strange, unfamiliar terror—rushed over him like a wave.

For of his visitor, there was nothing left but two burning eyes that grew and flamed until they filled Markham's field of vision utterly, locking him in an iron grip against which struggle was futile.

Then he felt the most horrible, indescribably, frightening sensation of his life.

Fingers were inside his brain, tangible physical fingers that parted each wrinkle, probed each convolution to examine his every thought and memory. Vainly he tried to drive out the prying fingers, to shut his brain, lock off his recollections.

But it was hopeless. He had a feeling that every knowledge he had ever gained, every thought he had ever harbored, was being reviewed by this horrible unknown stranger.

Suddenly deathly afraid, Markham summoned his strength and fought. Step by bitter step he drove the malignant prying entity out of his mind.

With a final, almost audible, snap the last tentacles lost their grip. His mind was free, clear, able to fill with the raging flame of his anger.

"Damn your black soul!" He staggered to his feet and leaped back.

There was a leer on Smith's face that seemed to be the root of all evil.

"Who are you?" Markham cried.

"Smith is as good as any name, Professor Markham. As to my purpose, I came to find an enemy. I found him, after searching the greatest minds of science. You, sir, are the most dangerous enemy in all the world to my people and to their Great Attainment. I am glad that at last I have found you. You will be destroyed—swiftly."

Then he was gone. Not out through the door nor through an open window, but vanishing into thin air; disappearing as utterly as though he had never been, before Markham's staring eyes.

With a hoarse croak, Markham leaped forward, stared wildly around the suddenly-empty office. Then he tore open the outer door.

"Professor Markham—" his secretary cried in alarm, seeing his haggard face. "What is it? Are you ill?"

He glared at her.

"Smith!" he bawled. "Did you see him? Didn't he leave through this door—just now?"

Bewildered, she shook her head.

"Why, no. He must be in your office—"

"*Must* be!" Markham stared at her, swallowed hard. Must be—but he isn't! He's vanished, like—like a ghost. Into thin air—"

"Like a ghost?" she faltered. "Professor Markham, you *are* sick."

WHEN Markham let himself into his apartment, he had tramped

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the streets, bare-headed and wild-eyed and blind to his surroundings, for twelve hours. He closed the door behind him and snapped on the soft indirect light.

Then he froze, every muscle in his body going rigid with surprise.

Across the room, a girl sat in his easy chair. The most beautiful girl Steve Markham's eyes had ever beheld.

Dazedly he stared at the long flowing waves of soft hair, so black it glowed with a purple sheen; the lovely slender face and dark eyes that reminded him of the ink-pools into which ancient sorcerers gazed to conjure up their visions.

More than that he could not quite make out with any degree of clarity, for as he stared, the girl's slender figure seemed to waver mistily—

—As though viewed through a veil of rising heat waves!

CHAPTER II

To Chichen Chikin

SHE faced him, rising lithely from the big chair, smiling a faint enigmatic smile. Markham spoke hoarsely, the first words that came into his mind.

"Hello," he said stupidly. "Another ghost?"

A strange, unreadable frown of annoyance whipped across her face for a moment. Then the smile returned.

"Perhaps, Steven Markham," she said. Her voice, queerly accenting unfamiliar syllables, was like far-off temple bells. "You might call me a ghost. But I have no time to explain myself. I am Tolkilla, captive High Priestess of the Great Attainment of Chichen Chikin. I am here to plead for your aid."

"Now, wait a minute," Markham sat down bewilderedly on a nearby chair, "this is too much for me. You're the same kind of being as Smith—you even resemble him in a beautiful way—and you came the same way he did. You talk about being a High Priestess and a prisoner and ask my help. What can *I* do?"

Anxiety touched her face.

"Tutul Xac, whom you call Smith, is of my land. But he is evil—horribly evil. He is the keeper of my golden prison. If you would help me to escape, I would show you how he could be overthrown and the world saved."

Markham started. "The world saved? Is it about the earthquakes?"

"Yes," she rushed on hurriedly. "Terrible earthquakes. But I can't explain now. There is so little time." For a moment her form shimmered and almost vanished. "In a few short weeks the end will come as ordained—unless you will come to Chichen Chikin at once. Will you come?"

"But I've never heard of Chichen Chikin," Markham protested. "Where is it? How can I get—"

"In the place where was your office," Tolkilla whispered, "there is upon your wall a map with many red dots."

"Seismograph stations," Markham affirmed.

"From these red dots are drawn many lines—lines that meet far down in a land you call Mexico. It is there you will find Chichen Chikin, the engine that is shattering the earth, and me. Will you come, Steven Markham? Will you come to me? Answer quickly, for I have only a few seconds left with you."

"Yes, I'll come," Markham promised abruptly, impressed by the earnest pleading in her eyes. "And you?"

"I shall wait for you, meet you as I have tonight—down there in the land you call Mexico."

Like a light beam vanishing at the

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click of the switch, she was gone—disappearing completely. Exactly as Smith, whom she called Tutul Xac, had gone.

FOR a long time Markham sat motionless, staring at the spot where the lovely apparition had vanished.

What strange beings were these two who had invaded his sanity? Were they phantasms of a disordered mind, visions painted on his brain by hypnosis, spirit beings from some world of the dead?

Or were they living persons, possessed of some strange and unfamiliar power to appear and disappear at will?

Undoubtedly, both were phantoms of some sort. He remembered the odd way in which Smith (he still called the eerie visitor by that common name in his mind) had refused to shake hands or to move the light chair on which Markham had bid him be seated.*

But, real or imaginary, he had promised the lovely and mysterious Tolkilla that he would meet her down in the Sierra Madre Mountains of Mexico, where the direction lines of all his seismograph records converged on an unexplored region.

He got out of his chair, went across to the telephone, hesitated a moment and then dialed a number. After endless measured hums of the automatic ringer, the line clicked and a sleep-drugged voice grumbled acknowledgment.

"Larson? This is Steve Markham. Your department includes a study of ancient American languages like Aztec, Toltec, Maya and the like, doesn't it?"

"Um-m-m, yeah. Why?"

"Are you familiar with the name Chichen Chikin? Do you know what it means or what language it's in?"

"Chichen Chikin? Let's see. Why, that sounds like Maya, though I never heard that particular name. Chichen means, roughly, the mouth or mouths of wells. Take Chichen Itzá, that famous ruin in Yucatan where we sent an expedition a couple of years ago; that means 'Mouths of the Wells of the Itzas or Itza people.' Chikin means west or to the west—the opposite of Likin, meaning east. I'd say your name meant something like 'the mouth of the western well.' Why, Steve? Have you run onto something interesting?"

"Thanks, Larson," Markham answered. "I came across the name in a story I was reading and I thought maybe—"

"My Gawd! Do you mean to say you dragged me out of a sound sleep just to ask me a—"

Markham hung up without apologizing, snapped off the light and went into his bedroom. Moving mechanically, like a sleep-walker, he undressed and got into bed.

THE next morning he began preparations for his fantastic journey to Chichen Chikin. It took him the better part of a day and endless fabrications to secure a permit to buy a gun. But eventually, late in the afternoon, he came into possession of a Luger automatic pistol, the most powerful he could buy.

Afterward, for no accountable reason except that some innate caution advised it, he bought a box of dynamite with caps and fuse.

These purchases he stored for the time being in his apartment. Not, however, without some misgivings. He had too vivid a recollection of Tutul Xac's threat to destroy him to rest completely

* Unquestionably this was because Smith was only a vision without the flesh-and-blood ability to handle material objects. Probably, had Smith extended his own hand when Markham offered a handshake, the scientist's clasp would have completely passed through the other's shadowy phantom hand.—Ed.

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easy at any time.

The second day he sought out a famous eye, ear, nose and throat specialist and posed a question. Was it possible, he asked without being specific, for a person to hear or feel vibrations of common objects that would normally be unnoticed?

"Queer," the specialist said, after an examination of Markham's ears. "The accident you spoke of has jarred a bit of cartilage out of normal position so that it impinges on the eardrums in a manner that makes the bones of your skull a sounding box for certain vibrations. Must be damned annoying, I agree. I'd say that a very minor operation, trimming away some of the misplaced cartilage, would completely stop the effect."

"Thanks," Markham told him. "I'll think it over. If I decide to have the operation, I'll phone for an appointment."

He went out hurriedly. It had suddenly occurred to him that, while such an operation might remove the terrible whining agony of the vibrations from the unknown earthquake-producing mechanism, it would also deprive him of his greatest advantage—the ability to sense the operation of that unknown machine Tolkilla had mentioned.

When he reached his apartment again, his arms were filled with bundles of food supplies for emergency rations. With these, his pistol, ammunition and the dynamite, he got into his car and drove to the airport to face the greatest test of all.

EVEN driving onto the parking apron of the airport made Markham break into cold sweat. The sound of warming motors filled him with nameless terror that left him weak and trembling.

It had been that way ever since the fatal crash of a year ago. From the day when jammed controls had carried Markham's best friend to death, he had been afraid of a plane, not with physical terror but with some psychic horror that drained his strength when he even thought of flying.

But now he *had* to fly. There was no other way to reach Chichen Chikin. Men on foot had been known to wander for months, lost in the mountain fastnesses of unexplored western Mexico.

"There she is, boss," a grimy mechanic flipped a salute as Markham carried his first load of supplies from his car. "As good as new and ready to fly to Europe—if anybody *wanted* to fly to Europe in this day and age."

Markham's plane was a sleek, fast amphibian. It had been repaired after the crash and had remained untouched in his private hangar ever since. With an effort, he made himself climb into the cabin and stow away his armload of bundles. Conquering that first terror made his next victory easier. By the time the plane was fully loaded and ready for the takeoff, his phobia had receded to no more than a vague nausea.

Panic surged back for a moment as he slid into the pilot's seat, but before it could gain a foothold, he whipped it by slamming the throttle full ahead and sweeping out across the field in a roaring takeoff.

Then he was in the air, flying southwest, and the nameless terror fell away for the moment. But somehow he knew terror still lurked within him. He wondered if, after all, he really *had* won his first battle.

STEVE MARKHAM was refueling in San Antonio, Texas, when the droning came again. He felt it beginning as a faint, distant whine that set his teeth on edge and made his brain quiver

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with vague pain. The sound struck terror to his heart.

It was not seven days since the last visitation! Were weekly intervals already giving way to still shorter periods? Did it mean that danger was nearer?

The droning sound was louder, sharper than it had ever been before. It became so terrible that Markham fled into the cabin of his plane, clasped his arms around his head and crouched there in agony. An eternity of six minutes passed.

When at last Markham stepped back to the turf, white-faced and sick, the airport attendant was rubbing his head and staring around him with a queer, wondering expression.

"Did you hear that?" he demanded.

Markham's breath caught. "Hear what?"

"Sort of a funny, faint whine that made my teeth buzz and my head ache like hell. Wonder what it was."

"Ever hear anything like it before?"

"Not me. Never heard *it* or anything like it, ever. And I'll be just as satisfied if I never hear it again."

"You'd better make a prayer of that wish and use it hard and frequently," Markham told him and took off in a whirlwind of leaping dust devils.

He was not even surprised when, a few hours later, he turned from a study of the mountainous barrier ahead to see the shimmering figure of Tolkilla sitting beside him.

CHAPTER III

Caught in the Trap

"I EXPECTED you," Markham said simply, his eyes drinking in the unbelievable radiance of her unearthly beauty. "I have been thinking of you in my mind all day."

"I know. I heard you. But I couldn't escape before. You must not call me like that again. Others might hear you —Tutul Xac and his priests."

"I wish you'd explain all this mystery. If you're a prisoner, how can you meet me like this? And, for that matter, how in the devil *do* you meet me this way? Isn't it about time you gave me some inkling of what this place is that I'm going to, what's being done there and what I'm expected to do to help you? After all, I've got to know what I'm up against before I can figure ways to meet it."

"Soon. Very soon, Steven Markham. When you have reached the landing place, you shall know all. But now I have too little time. I came only to guide you to your first goal."

She bent forward, frowning prettily out at the gloomy mass of mountains ahead and below. Markham watched her breathlessly until she pointed ahead.

"See. There, in the distance, is my land."

Markham squinted and then caught his breath. Far ahead, beyond the farthest mountains, a tremendous purple wall went up and up until it vanished in a ceiling of clouds. To the north and to the south he could faintly see where the purple wall ended and the bluer sky beyond became visible.

"Good Lord!" he gasped. "What is it? A mountain?"

"Of a sort. It is what you call a—a plateau. It is a great high rock, flat upon the top, where Chichen Chikin sits. On the eastern side there is a broad, flat shelf just at the edge of the cloud layer. You will be able to land there easily, for it is rock and very smooth. There you will be met and told everything concerning what is happening and concerning the Day When The Moon Is To Return. There, too, you will see me once more."

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She smiled with that enigmatic, misty smile, and her lips pursed for a moment in coquettish invitation that made the blood thunder in Markham's veins. Involuntarily, he dropped the controls and reached hungry hands toward the vision.

"Goodbye," she whispered, and was gone.

Steven Markham's hands closed on empty air, closed and clenched into tight, trembling fists.

AN hour later, approaching the sheer, breathless wall of the plateau, he saw the landing shelf Tolkilla had described, a mere rock ledge carved into the towering pinnacle.

Cautiously, Markham fish-tailed the plane in for a short-run landing on the smooth rock. As he cut the motor switch and sat for a moment, stung the Luger pistol into concealment under his shirt, he became aware of two things.

He noticed first that the air was warm, in vivid contrast to the high-altitude cold through which he had been flying. And the source of the pleasant warmth seemed to lie in a beam of golden light that bathed the plane, as though he had landed in the direct rays of a hot noon-day sun. Yet no sun was visible.

The second discovery was the sound. Faint and almost unnoticeable came a soft, constant humming like the sound made by telephone wires on a windy day. It was an all-pervading drone that seemed to emanate from the towering mass of rock itself, as though the pinnace were a vast tuning fork that had been but recently plucked.

But this humming sound was not a torture to Markham's ears as the now-familiar periodic droning sound had been. This was soft, soothing and somehow invigorating, as though all the life-movements in the cells of his body were stirring and quickening in response to the eternal rhythm. He had a queer, abrupt feeling of coming home, as though the humming were a goal he had been seeking hungrily, but subconsciously, all his life and, having found it, never wanted to leave.

Almost dreamily he unlatched the cabin door and stepped down into the pleasant warmth of the ledge. Presently he turned without conscious volition and walked toward the strange group that, appearing from nowhere on the rock ledge, was advancing purposefully toward him.

There were eight persons in the approaching group and they marched in formation, three walking at each side of two central figures, like bodyguards. All were dressed in costumes unlike any Markham had ever seen.

The six guards were dressed in nothing more than wide belts from which skirt-like drapes of rich crimson dropped almost to their knees, front and back. The belt itself, ornamented in vivid colors, was made of molded metal strips linked together for flexibility. Around each guard's bronzed neck hung a chain of the same colored metal links, terminating in an odd ornament of pure gold whose central figure was an engraving of the sun with a hawk-like human face within its disc. Each wore, in addition, a helmet of linked metal, topped by a plume of iridescent red and green feathers.

In their hands were objects of metal —richly scrolled flat cases from the ends of which protruded blunt tubes. They were silvery white, bright as chromium, with a gold lever projecting from the top.

Markham's wondering gaze moved to the two central figures. He saw similar but much more elaborate costumes, with belts of pure gold and helmets topped by much more gorgeous feather plumes.

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One of the central figures wore linked gold breast plates.

It was Tolkilla, calm, confident, regal —and *unfettered!*

And, last of all, Markham saw the triumphantly-smiling face of Tutul Xac.

LIKE a dreamer awakening, his eyes snapped wide. The narcotic effect of the eternal humming rhythm fell from his brain. In one seering blaze of comprehension he saw—and understood.

"A trap!" he cried. "You laid a trap —and like an idiot, I blundered right into it with my eyes wide open!"

He was staring, eyes blazing with accusation, straight at Tolkilla.

Her lips curved in the enigmatic smile that had haunted Markham's dreams from his first sight of her.

"Of course," she agreed. "You were an enemy of my people and of their Great Attainment. Therefore, you must be destroyed, even as Tutul Xac promised."

"You treacherous devil!"

Markham lunged forward with clenched fists upraised.

"STOP!" The voice of Tutul Xac was a thunder that awoke weird echoes against the humming rock. "You are not dealing with helpless phantoms, now, but with flesh-and-blood warriors and weapons your puny science dares not even imagine!"

"To hell with you and your weapons!" Markham raged, tugging at the hidden Luger inside his shirt. "I'll show you a weapon that'll match anything you Master Minds can produce."

The Luger jerked free in his hand.

Tutul Xac shouted a single sharp word. The guards at the front of each column lifted the odd metal cases, turning them so the blunt tubes pointed at Steve Markham.

Blinding, unbearable light lanced out, struck Markham full in the face. There was a swift, unendurable interval of intense heat and intense cold that was vaguely reminiscent of a mild sunstroke he had once suffered.

He tried to level the Luger, tried to raise his left hand to shield his eyes from the searing, stabbing light. But he could do none of these things and in that instant his senses swirled away into blackness.

Markham was not even conscious of the impact when his senseless body struck the rock floor.

CHAPTER IV

The Earth-Wrecker

THE first returning sensation was of a corkscrew of agony that spiralled in through Markham's tortured eardrums and burrowed deep into the quivering recesses of his brain. It was wordless, inhuman, yet a sound. And it rose and fell, swelling to a drone of unutterable triumph, falling away to a thin whisper as of humility before some mighty force.

It was not the agonizing, earth-shaking doom drone, audible to none but Markham's super-sensitive ears. Nor was it that softer, all-pervading life-drone, for he could still hear that in the background like a shuttle, weaving a mad pattern of sound in and out of the mightier chorus.

This was a new, wholly audible, torturous sound and Markham came up out of the depths of blackness fighting against it. His face twitched uncontrollably as the vibrations hammered against raw nerve-ends. He tried to bring up his hands to cover his ears and came completely awake at the realization that his hands were pinioned at his sides. He opened his eyes.

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He was lying, flat on his back, spread-eagled and chained upon a massive altar of bright, silver-like metal. The altar stood on the flat top of a truncated pyramid and by twisting his head, Markham could see stone steps falling away and lines of feathered warriors ranged stiffly down those steps.

And he could see the great mass of people packed up against the base of the pyramid, eyes tightly shut, bronze bodies swaying in unison to the buzzing hum that issued from every throat.

They were not chanting. They were *humming!*

Markham shuddered instinctively as the humming swelled again and became a hellishly-inhuman copy of the dread doom drone that had drawn him here. This was madness, he knew, and there was no solid anchor for his wavering sanity in the vision of the city spread out to far horizons.

His first thought was that he was looking down upon the plaster model of Chichen Itza in the University Museum. Here were the same flat roofs, the same truncated pyramids, some surmounted by pillared walls. But here was something not a part of the plaster model. For the pyramids were bases for great golden hemispheres, concave bowls tilted against the pillared walls at angles that made them repositories for the rays of the high sun.*

Memory of the last incident of consciousness swept away the hazy clouds that had fogged his senses. He swung his head the other way for the first time and his eyes snapped wide.

BEFORE the altar, swaying to the cadence of the humming chant, stood Tutul Xac in gorgeous costume. The lean man's right hand was upraised and in his fist was a long, keen knife of gold pointing an invisible line toward Markham's naked chest. In the priest's black eyes was a sardonic, mocking glow and his thin lips twisted in a leer of complete triumph.

Behind Tutul Xac, Tolkilla stood stiffly. She was like a woman drugged, or a lovely, cleverly-fashioned statue until she felt the outpouring of scorn and loathing in Markham's gaze. Then a dull flush tinged the velvet bronze of her cheeks.

Markham forced his gaze away and his attention was caught by an object that completely dominated the scene. It was an obelisk of silvery metal, rising from the center of the pyramid's top. From a base, perhaps six feet to a side, it tapered to a slender needle of silvery flame a hundred feet in the air. Markham noted curiously that the thick base of the obelisk was oddly gouged and scarred, with great slivers bitten out of the gleaming metal.

Far away, at the northern tip of the city, he could see a similar pyramid, surmounted by a similar spire of gleaming metal. Between these towering pillars, the city lay in a compact oval with the spires at its extremities. He frowned, trying to capture the vague significance of the spires and the city plan between.

"You awaken in time," Tutul Xac interrupted his bewilderment, "to witness the great ceremonial of sacrifice. You may think it crude, perhaps, but it serves a purpose. Not only does it satisfy the rabble, but it forms a most convenient method of eliminating a dangerous enemy."

The pitch of the human droning changed. Tutul Xac turned and spoke

* It has always been understood the people of Chichen Itza were sun-worshippers. Here in Chichen Chikin, however, instead of *worshipping* the sun, these mysterious ancients *used* the sun. These pyramids, then, instead of altars, were parts of engines. Even the strange ray that had struck Markham down was like powerfully condensed sunlight. His reaction to it had been that of a sunstroke victim.—Ed.

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to Tolkilla in a strange tongue. At his words, she picked up a queer, padded hammer that lay upon a lesser altar nearby and moved woodenly toward the thick, scarred base of the spire.

Tutul Xac was bent forward, now, avidly watching the progress of a shadow upon the floor. Straining, Markham could see that it was the shadow of the great altar on which he lay, creeping across a weird and intricate pattern graven into the floor beneath. And he saw that the sharp edge of the shadow was near, terribly near, to the central figure of that pattern.

The shadow touched the figure and Tutul Xac's arms went high. The humming broke off in mid-note.

In the profound, breathless silence that followed, Tolkilla stepped forward and struck the scarred base of the obelisk a single, light blow. From the crowds below came a gusty sigh of expelled breath. For a moment there was nothing . . .

ABRUPTLY a choked sob of utter agony burst through Markham's set lips.

For, sharper and more terrible than ever before, came the rising whine of the doom-drone, the sound that presaged the shaking of the earth, the sound that had torn Markham from his normal life to hurl him into this mad nightmare of fantasy.

The sound was rising, deepening, until in a moment, Markham knew, his tortured nerves would shatter and he would go screamingly mad under the unendurable agony of its vibrations.

As abruptly as it had begun, the drone began to die away. Markham had the queer feeling that the vibrations were still pulsing but that here where he lay, some force was damping their fury. He could still feel faint agony, as though his whole body were being pounded mercilessly by invisible pulsations of force, but the sharper torment of the shrill wine was muffled. By what?

Now Markham's straining eyes saw the edges of the silvery obelisk lose their sharpness, melt away into a dull blur of unspeakably swift motion. And far away, across the city, he saw the twin spire losing its own sharp delineation, growing misty against the vivid blue of the sky.

Then it all became horribly clear to him. In a single blinding light of realization, he saw the earth-shaking engine in all its terrible potentiality. Perfectly attuned, they could shatter the Earth.*

Markham understood, then, the reason for the changing periodicity of the doom-drone as the destroyers quested for the exact vibration point of the earth itself. And he saw the reason for the chipped and scarred base of the spire where metal had been removed to achieve exactly the desired tonal pitch.

These things Markham saw with terrible clarity. But even clearer was the realization of his own complete helplessness.

Tutul Xac, smiling, came back to poise the knife above Markham's bared breast. Behind the priest, Tolkilla was looking, now—staring with a fixed intensity that seemed to contain all the energy of her being. Markham forced

* The two weird obelisks of unknown metal were no less than two gigantic arms of a tuning fork whose base was rooted deep in the rock foundations of the earth itself. So small a thing as the tiny hammer-blow administered by Tolkilla was enough to set up immeasurably terrible vibrations, vibrations that transmitted themselves to the opposite silvery spire exacly as both arms of a tuning fork vibrate when only one arm is plucked.

And between the two spires, the vibrations met and damped one another, forming the zone of quiet in which the city lay. But outside that zone, implacable pulsations flowed out in irresistible waves of force until the whole earth trembled to their domination.—Ed.

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himself to avoid her purposeful stare. How could one so utterly lovely be so treacherous?

He told himself fiercely that it no longer mattered. In a moment the golden knife would flash down to carve the beating heart from his breast and nothing would matter.

He felt a strange calmness, born of utter helplessness, steal over him like an anaesthetic. There was no escape. His golden manacles were too strong for any strength he could muster.

Down below the humming swelled to a paean of triumph. Tutul Xac's muscles writhed as he tensed for the death-stroke.

Markham twisted his head, partly to look away from the hypnotic glitter of the thirsty blade, partly to look for the last time on a sunlit world. His eyes roved dully over the massed multitudes, moved beyond and past them and stopped at a gaping hole that yawned blackly at one side of the pyramid on which he lay. Unmistakable brown stains running down from the altar on which he lay pointed the inevitable disposition of his body, once his heart had been torn out for the sacrifice.

"In a moment I'll be down there," he said, unconsciously speaking aloud. "Down into Chichen Chikin, the Mouth of the Western Well."

CHAPTER V

Aid from an Enemy

THE effect of Markham's words on Tutul Xac was electrical. The bronzed jaw dropped, the thin face taking on an expression of dazed incredulity. The lifted arm, already starting the downward plunge of the sacrificial knife, halted. A flame of malevolent hatred poured from the priest's black eyes.

"You — *know!*" Tutul Xac whispered. "You—*translated the Maya tongue!*"

Markham had not the slightest idea what he had said or done to arouse the surge of emotions but some innate cunning urged him to play his advantage.

"Of course," he said, as calmly as he could. "Not Chichen Likin, the mouth of the eastern well, but Chichen *Chikin.*"

"Oh, gods!"

There was suddenly a crawling worm of doubt and fear in the depths of Tutul Xac's eyes. He bent above Markham, his lean body trembling inexplicably.

"You had no knowledge of our tongue in your mind when I probed its depths that day in your office! Whence came your knowledge now? I could not have overlooked it then. I searched deep into every corner—or almost every corner—before you forced me out."

Suddenly Markham saw what lay behind Tutul Xac's frantic fear. His unconsciously casual use of the only two Maya names he knew had made the priest think that Markham actually knew the language. But at the time Tutul Xac, calling himself Smith, had probed Markham's mind, there had been no such knowledge present.

Or had there? That was the question that gnawed at the priest's certainty. He had allowed Markham to drive him from his search before he was quite finished, though he believed then that he had examined every cell of knowledge that mattered. Now doubt was eating like a canker into the priest's assurance.

Markham saw the flicker of unfamiliar emotions in Tutul Xac's eyes and the realization of their cause gave him a quick surge of hope. If he could only finish the thing he had unwittingly begun—

"You weren't so clever," he said

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softly. "You only read what I wanted you to read that day and were foolishly contented. You completely overlooked the real knowledge in my brain because I hid it from you."

Tutul Xac jerked up the golden knife, his face working insanely with the fury of his rage.

"If there was any further knowledge, as you claim, it will die now!"

"All," Markham whispered, more calmly than he felt, "except that part of my knowledge which I have already passed on to other scientists who began working at once to defeat you. You saw, that day, that my interest in the earthquakes was not a sudden impulse but the outgrowth of months of intensive study and research. Do you think I am fool enough to lock such a secret away from those who might aid in—"

"You lie!" Tutul Xac screamed interrupting, his thin lips writhing. "If you have such hidden knowledge as you claim, *prove it!* Speak to me now in my own tongue—in the tongue of the True Man!"

MARKHAM'S heart sank. If he failed to respond in Maya, Tutul Xac would know that he was lying and would rip out his heart without further delay. But Steve Markham knew not a single word of Maya beyond the names he had used so opportunely. He wet his lips.

In that instant, he felt the sensation.

Out of nowhere, a strange word implanted itself in his mind—a word he had never heard before in his life. Haltingly, his lips pronounced the word.

Another word-vision flashed into its place and he spoke that. With gathering speed, a long and, to him, utterly-meaningless sentence rolled from his lips.

"Kukulcan!" Tutul Xac cried. "It is true!" Quick! What other knowledge did you conceal from me? Who else knows of your mission here? Who else is working to defeat the Great Attainment?"

"Don't be an ass!" Markham said coldly, reverting to English. "Do you think I'm fool enough to tell you so you can kill me?"

"You are the fool! I'll probe your mind again, dig into every corner. And this time, you will not be able—"

He whirled, barked a harsh command. Below, the humming ceased again. Warriors sprang up the steps, unfastened the golden chains that bound Markham to the altar. Strong hands set him on his feet.

"To the inner temple!" Tutul Xac commanded. "And guard him with your lives."

As Markham went down the long steps, he turned his head to look back. Behind the raging priest, he saw Tolkilla leaning against the lesser altar in an attitude of complete exhaustion. Her head was bent so that her long hair obscured her face.

And in that moment, Markham knew whence had come the word-visions of the Maya tongue that had saved his life. He let himself be marched down the pyramid's steps, then, his mind a maelstrom of seething emotions.

AT the base of the pyramid, a lane opened through the tight-packed, murmuring crowd and Markham was led through it down a broad avenue of smooth-polished stone. Presently his captors turned toward a huge, richly-carved building of several stories, each story stepped back from the one below.

Markham was marched in between towering Feathered Serpent pillars and down a shadowy, statue-lined corridor to a massive door, studded with gold. A golden key in the hands of a warrior sent the door swinging inward to reveal

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a vast room tapestried in rich silks and furnished in gold and the silvery metal.

Markham was staring at the incredible luxury before him when a hard shove hurled him through the open doorway. Behind him the door slammed with a solid thud. He got to his feet again, cursing. He made no effort to try the door for the finality of its closing impact was enough to discourage that.

Instead, he went across an ankle-deep silk rug to the windows—tall unglazed slits, too narrow even to admit his head. In the distance he could see one of the silvery spires still quivering, still sending out its invisible force-waves of destruction. The sight of it mocked his complete helplessness.

Markham cursed his own futility. Here he was, within sight of the earth-shaking engine, yet as helpless in his golden prison as though he were still in New York, hammering the difference between igneous and sedimentary rocks into freshman skulls.

But stone walls were not his only prison. His mind, too, felt caged, hemmed in by an impenetrable circle of unanswered questions and unsolved riddles. Who were these bronze-skinned savages with a science beyond any known to civilization? Were they the survivors of that vanished Mayan civilization whose disappearance still puzzled archaeologists? It seemed obvious that they were, fantastic though such an answer might be. And what was the secret of the force employed in their weapons? What was the odd silvery metal, so different from anything he had ever seen, yet apparently so abundant here?

And interlacing every question, running an unbidden thread through every thought, was, to Markham, the greatest problem of all. What was Tolkilla's true part in the drama? By her own admission she had lured him here to be destroyed. Then she had saved his life.

But whether she was, in truth, but an unwilling actor in the plot or a guileful sorceress, she haunted Markham's brain with visions of her loveliness, her utter desirability.

FOR a long time Markham remained by the window, lost in thought. Then a faint sound penetrated his absorption and sent him whipping around with clenched fists upraised.

His breath whistled out through his teeth and his tight fists relaxed. Across the room, against what had been, a few moments before, nothing but bare wall, stood a table heaped with a variety of tempting foods.

Half expecting the vision to disappear, Markham moved toward it. He was painfully conscious of the thirty-odd hours since his last meal and his mouth watered as his greedy nostrils drank the savor of rich foods, the perfume of exotic fruits and rare wines.

His body trembled with desire for the food but he hesitated. It would be so easy to load those tempting dishes with deadly poison.

Then he pushed the thoughts aside. Such a treachery was not in keeping with Tutul Xac's egomaniacal character. Markham had a feeling that when the lean priest at last achieved his enemy's death, it would be out in full view of the blood-hungry multitudes, part of some elaborate sacrificial ceremony. And there was still the matter of possible hidden knowledge within his mind, as yet unplumbed by Tutul Xac's telepathic powers.

"To hell with it!" Markham decided aloud. "I'm hungry."

He drew a couch over close to the table, relaxed on it gratefully and attacked the food.

"Markham! Steven Markham!"

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The faint, tinkling whisper arrested Markham's pleasure. He jerked up his head to probe the corners of the room with narrowed gaze. Then he realized that the whisper was not an audible sound but a thought-impression, originating inside his own brain.

Crudely, because telepathy was still a new experience, he formed an answer in his mind.

"Where are you? Who is it? Is it Tolk—"

"Sh-h-h! Do not speak a name or try to answer. There are other minds, alert for treachery. I risk everything to give you this warning. Eat but lightly of the food and do not allow yourself to fall asleep afterward. Too much food dulls the senses, which is the purpose of the feast before you. And in the mid-state between waking and sleeping, the mind becomes powerless to resist invasion. Be careful—"

The whisper was gone, the last tinkling echo whisked away from his brain. Markham stared longingly at the tempting platters still untouched. Presently he sighed heavily and arose from the table.

Grimly he carried the heaping platters, one by one, across the room and concealed their contents behind the draperies, underneath couches and chairs, in every possible hiding place he could find. When at last he finished, the table was mute evidence that a feast had disappeared.

Now, unless he were being spied upon, either telepathically or visually, through slits in the walls, it would appear that he had fallen into the trap and gorged himself to a state of lethargy.

Finally, Markham crossed to a soft couch, piled high with silken pillows. He stood before it for a moment, stretching and yawning audibly.

After a moment he stretched himself on the delicious softness of the deep cushions and closed his eyes.

CHAPTER VI

The Upper Hand

MARKHAM'S first warning that he was no longer alone in the luxurious room came when his ears caught the faint, sibilant whisper of muted breathing somewhere close by. He dared not open his eyes to investigate, but every muscle in his body tensed at the unmistakable feeling of an alien presence above his couch.

The breathing grew closer, louder. A fringe of silk caressed his hand. Close, so close that Markham could feel the feather-touch of exhaled breath against his cheek, Tutul Xac's voice began a soft, soothing murmur.

"Sleep, oh weary one. Sleep in dreamless peace, but sleep lightly, gently, with your mind relaxed. Open your mind, oh sleepy one, that I might enter and converse with it."

Markham felt the first nauseous impact of the priest's uncanny, telepathic probing of his mind.

"Tell me," the priest droned softly. "Tell me all the knowledge that lies hidden in your mind."

Markham opened his eyes, staring straight into the flaming eyes of Tutul Xac, not six inches above his.

"Not today, brother!" he snarled.

His arms whipped up, encircled the priest's thin body and jerked it down upon him.

The element of complete surprise in his attack gave him the victory. Two terrified guards in the doorway stood frozen, afraid to unleash their force rays for fear of hitting Tutul Xac. And Markham took good care to keep the High Priest's squirming, clawing, writhing figure as a shield between him and the door.

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But he had his hands full. There was an unbelievable strength in the priest's wiry body and an insane desperation that further multiplied the power of his muscles. Kicking, clawing, butting with his head, he used every trick at his command to break Markham's strangling arms.

"You will die a thousand terrible deaths," he promised in sobbing gasps of fury. "You will be tortured upon the highest altar with instruments of agony unimaginable to your feeble science."

"Nuts!" Markham snapped inelegantly. "Your neck can be cracked just like anyone else's. And it will be in another minute."

He whipped his legs around the priest's body in a crushing scissors-lock, holding the writhing figure as in a vise. His right hand fumbled out and found a heavy cord of the bed draperies. He forced a loop of it around Tutul Xac's throat and drew it tight.

THE priest's face darkened, his eyes bulged and his tongue came out between his teeth. Abruptly the resistance melted from his body.

"Tell your guards," Markham hissed in his ear, "to drop their weapons and turn their backs. And don't forget I can understand every word you say to them. One phoney order—"

He tightened the strangling loop a trifle to emphasize his bluff.

With a supreme effort, Tutul Xac managed a nod. Markham grinned with relief and eased off on the choking pressure. The priest coughed a string of stuttering syllables that Markham fervently hoped were the right commands.

Not until the two warriors, baleful and hesitant, laid down their flat metal cases and turned to face the door did he draw a full breath of relief. Then, panting and unsteady from his exertions, he rolled Tutul Xac's figure off and got to his feet. He was careful to keep the thin body before him as a shield, his hand keeping the cord loop uncomfortably tight as a silent warning. For a moment he hesitated, turning over half-formed plans in his mind, plotting his next move.

And in that moment, a change came over Tutul Xac's face. The black eyes seemed to flame and draw inward. Then they closed and a vein crawled in each of the priest's hollow temples. Droplets of perspiration formed across his dark forehead, evidence of terrific concentration.

But these things Markham could not see because he was holding Tutul Xac so that the priest's face was turned away. He could only see, a moment later when he reached a decision and jerked his captive into motion, the faint smile of mocking triumph that now wreathed the thin lips. That smile bothered him vaguely but he forgot it in the press of more immediate menace.

"If anything happens to me," he promised grimly, "your neck goes first."

"Of course," the priest choked. "Enjoy your slender advantage to the utmost. When again it is my turn to be the captor and you the captive, expect no mercy from me."

"You mean *if*—not when," Markham corrected.

Steering the strangely unresisting figure ahead of him, Markham crossed the room and picked up one of the flat cases discarded by the guards.

"How does this thing work?"

"Draw upon your vast store of knowledge," Tutul Xac sneered, "and discover for yourself."

Markham turned the blunt muzzle toward a nearby wall and pressed the golden lever as he remembered seeing the guards do when he was struck down

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on the ledge. A stream of blazing golden light lanced from the muzzle. Where the light struck the wall, the polished stone glowed and smoked.

"Heat!" Markham exclaimed in satisfaction. "Now I *know* you'll behave, brother, with this in your back."

HE shifted his grip so that he could hold the deadly case against Tutul Xac's back with his right hand, retaining his grasp of the strangling cord with his left.

"Now get moving. We'll go down the street and back to that pyramid with the altars and the vibrating shaft on top. And if anybody makes a move to attack me on the way, you won't live long enough to see what this heat gun is going to do to your pretty little earthquake machine. Tell your guards to march ahead and behave."

For the first time, Markham saw a fleeting glint of fear in the obsidian eyes. Then the emotion was gone or successfully masked and the mocking smile again touched the thin, cruel lips. He translated Markham's order to the guards without resistance.

The journey back through the shadowy corridors to the broad avenue was uneventful. No lurking figures stirred in the shadows and no deadly heat-rays licked out from behind the towering statues. The two guards kept ten paces ahead, marching stiffly. Only their glittering eyes betrayed the raging fury in their souls. Tutul Xac marched quietly, but his quiescence was like that of a coiled serpent that waits patiently for its prey to venture within striking range.

Markham's nerves crawled with a premonition of disaster as he stepped out between the towering Feathered Serpents into the light of the declining sun. For the entire population of Chichen Chikin waited in the street, filling the broad avenue from end to end, meeting him with a concentrated gaze of mass malevolence that struck the pit of his stomach like a tangible physical blow.

In that moment, Markham knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that every person congregated there had been expecting his appearance. That somehow, Tutul Xac had communicated with the populace and told them what had occurred.

"If anybody makes a move to attack me or to rescue you, you'll die," he warned tensely, tightening his grip on the garrotting cord for emphasis.

"Of course," the priest said, his black eyes mocking his captor's concern.

"Tell them to turn around and march down the street ahead of us. *All* of them! I'm not taking chances on a heat-blast in the back from behind one of those buildings. And remember that if anything happens like that, even reflex action will be enough to make me press this trigger."

TUTUL XAC barked a command and the glowering mob fell obediently back, retreating down the avenue as Markham and his captives moved forward. At the base of the sacrificial pyramid, they hesitated. Before Markham could give an order, the priest snarled a few words and the crowd pressed back still further, leaving the stairway up the pyramid's side clear and unobstructed.

It was easy—*too* easy—Markham thought, and a cold sweat prickled along his spine. The priest's ready agreement and even voluntary co-operation could only mean one thing. He was letting Markham walk blindly into a trap. But there was no turning back now.

Markham nudged his captive forward, giving a low-voiced order. Tutul Xac translated the command and the two captive guards wheeled stiffly and

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marched away into the crowd. Markham had no use for their presence and he didn't want to be hampered by having to watch them continuously. His own grim business of effectually smashing the earth-shattering spire above would demand all of his attention.

When the warriors had gone, Markham and the priest began the long climb up the carved steps to the pyramid's flat top—up to the altars, the padded hammer and the deadly quivering spire.

Abruptly Markham jerked his captive to a halt and peered back, his eyes widening. The forefront of the dense crowd below was stirring, shifting, milling apart to open a narrow lane from the rear.

And through that lane, a regal figure in sweeping ceremonial garments and plumed head-dress, marched Tolkilla.

CHAPTER VII

Mission's Failure

MARKHAM cursed feverishly and fluently.

"What's the game?" he snarled in Tutul Xac's ear. "You called her here, somehow. What for? What are you trying to put over?"

"What I promised you," the priest answered coldly. "Your destruction, which you cannot escape."

"We'll see about that."

Markham waited, every nerve in his body quivering with mounting tension, while Tolkilla crossed the clearest space below and mounted the stone stairway. Through narrowed, desperate eyes he watched the stiff woodenness of her gait and the cold blankness of her pale, set face. In her movements was a suggestion of hypnosis.

"Tell her to go back," Markham snarled in sudden, inexplicable fear. "Send her back."

Tutul Xac laughed.

"Go back, Tolkilla. You aren't wanted up here," he said, amused.

Tolkilla gave no sign of hearing. She kept on her relentless upward climb, stiffly, like a lovely robot, until she reached the step on which they waited. Then she stopped, staring blankly at and through Markham and the priest, still not speaking or showing emotion.

"What have you done to her?" Markham cried. "If you have—" he broke off, wild-eyed. "Damn your soul, I know what you've done. You've moved into her mind, taken over control of her body. I've got your body captive here, so you sent your will over to operate through *her!*"

Tutul Xac's eyes narrowed maliciously.

"You are more clever than I thought."

"But you won't stop me," Markham raged. "I can still destroy this body of yours. Your control can never survive the destruction of this body."

He caught up the priest's thin figure and raced up the remaining steps to the pyramid's top, leaving Tolkilla to follow relentlessly, mechanically behind. At the top, he set Tutul Xac's feet on the stone and faced the vibrating spire of glistening, silvery metal. Once again he was painfully conscious of the tangled skein of terrible vibrations in the tortured air, fainter now but still agony to his sensitive ears, hammering at his raw nerves.

Forcing himself to a degree of calmness, Markham twisted the choking belt tighter around Tutul Xac's throat with his left hand. His right hand lifted, pointing the flat case at the broad, scarred base of the spire. One blast from that blunt muzzle would melt the silvery metal like butter, destroy the delicately-achieved tonal pitch of the great tuning fork.

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"Is it—" Tutil Xac choked the words through his constricted throat. "Is it worth Tolkilla's life to destroy the weapon of the Great Attainment?"

"What?"

MARKHAM's head whipped around for a moment, his heart stopped beating.

The lovely figure of the priestess had reached the pyramid's top. As Markham whirled, she was climbing up onto the great altar on which he had so nearly been sacrificed.

As he cried an involuntary warning, she moved woodenly out to the very edge of the altar, where it lay flush with the edge of the pyramid's top, and poised there with her slender arms upraised. Two hundred dizzying feet below, at the base of the glass-smooth, blood-encrusted slope of the pyramid, gaped the Chichen Chikin—the mouth of the western well. There was no doubt in Markham's mind but that the well penetrated deep into the bowels of the rock pinnacle supporting this weird, fantastic land.

And as his breath caught, the girl stepped to the very edge of the altar, directly above the well, and swayed forward.

"*Tolkilla!* Stop, for God's sake—"

Madness flamed in Markham's brain. The thought of her glorious body smashed against the rocks below filled him with agony.

"She will wait," Tutul Xac said calmly. "She has been instructed not to leap until the exact instant you fire the sunlight beam at the spire. Or—" he added, laughing, "until you make a move to save her or to harm me further."

Too late Markham saw the trap into which he had blundered. He was much too far away to possibly reach Tolkilla before she could send her body hurtling down to destruction. And he knew that the evil genius controlling her helpless body would not hesitate to make her leap.

Markham's reeling brain clutched at one forlorn hope.

"She isn't real," he cried hoarsely. "You wouldn't dare sacrifice your own priestess. That's only a phantom projection of her real body, the way you both projected yourselves to me in New York."

There was no audible command, but Tolkilla's arms dropped. Her hands fumbled at the golden plates confining her breasts. A moment later she straightened, nude except for the girdle about her slim waist and the diaphanous crimson robes falling from it to her sandaled feet.

The gold breast plates thunked solidly to the slab at Markham's feet. The sound and the impact brought a groan to his lips. It was undeniable evidence that the figure of the lovely priestess was no vision but a flesh-and-blood reality. He remembered all too well that in the phantom form, they had not been capable of grasping or moving material objects.

No, Tolkilla was horribly real, and at the first move Markham made to destroy the earth-shaking instrument, to harm Tutul Xac or to approach her own dizzy perch, she would hurl herself to death below. It was an *impasse*. The decision facing Markham tore at his heart, for if he chose to disregard Tolkilla's safety, it would take him but a moment to smash the vibrating spire beyond further danger to earth.

"Well," Tutul Xac's voice, even choked as it was by the constricting belt, held mockery. "Have you chosen? Will you sacrifice the priestess or do you prefer to throw your weapon over the edge and release me at once? The decision is yours. Choose quickly."

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CHAPTER VIII

The Moon's Return

BELOW, as if in response to some command inaudible to Markham, columns of feathered warriors marched through the tense crowd. Forming a solid phalanx, they wheeled and started up the stone steps of the pyramid.

For Markham, it was stalemate—and the end!

Whether Tolkilla leaped to her destruction or not; whether he blasted away the silvery spire or not—these inexorable warriors were marching upward, each savage mind consumed with hatred toward the one who had desecrated the shrine and laid violent hands upon the person of their High Priest.

"I'll choose," Markham panted. "I'll choose—"

He lifted the sunlight gun and rested it across his left arm. Very carefully he centered the blunt tube straight at the base of the deadly spire.

"I have chosen," Markham said, and squeezed the golden trigger.

But Tutul Xac, sensing Markham's grim purpose, whirled suddenly, a fear-filled scream welling from his throat. His taloned fingers snatched the heat gun from Markham's fingers. Then he strove desperately to bring it to bear—*on Tolkilla,* Markham thought.

Markham cursed, snatched at his arm, flung an arm around Tutul Xac's throat.

Yellow light flamed out—not toward the girl, ready to leap to her death but straight at the edge of the great golden altar. The flame struck, an inch below where Tolkilla's sandaled feet projected over the edge.

Under the impact of the powerful beam, the soft metal of the altar smoked and turned a cherry red as the gold approached its melting point from the terrific concentration of heat.

And Tolkilla did what Tutul Xac obviously wanted her to do—what any flesh-and-blood person, drugged or fully sensible, would do when the ground underfoot grew too hot for comfort.

She leaped backward, away from the sudden burst of agonizing heat that seared her feet. Away from the yawning chasm that beckoned her to destruction.

Instantly Markham snatched the gun from Tutul Xac, sent him reeling with a hard shove. In the same motion, he dove across the intervening space, swept Tolkilla into his arms and carried her a safe distance from the deadly brink.

As he held her, he stared into her wide eyes and saw there a dawning return to full consciousness, an awareness of what Markham had done and mute gratitude. It was his first actual contact with the thrilling warmth of her material body and the contact made his pulses race and his brain reel dizzily.

For a moment he felt an insane urge to abandon his futile struggles, to relax and spend the last precious seconds of his life in her arms.

But his hesitation was only momentary. The vague but never-ending agony at his nerve-ends snapped him back to the hellish reality of the quivering shaft above his head.

HE twisted around and jerked up the sunlight gun. A single quick, flaming blast and those deadly pulsations would be stilled. His thumb depressed the golden lever, sent the beam of searing heat lashing out.

His movement was swift, but another's was swifter. In that single instant of hesitation when he stared into Tolkilla's dark eyes, Tutul Xac had recovered his balance. Springing to his feet like a striking serpent, the lean priest scooped up the heavy gold breast

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plates that had been Tolkilla's and hurled them straight at his enemy.

The linked gold, massive and sharp-edged, struck Markham's shoulder with crushing impact, wringing an involuntary grunt of pain from his lips. The sunlight beam shot wide of its mark as the flat case flew from his suddenly-numbed fingers and vanished from sight over the brink of the pyramid's top.

Then Tutul Xac was upon him, his plunging body slamming Markham back with stunning force while lean, incredibly-strong fingers dug into his throat. Markham rolled and twisted, driving vicious, futile blows while the deadly clutch tightened until his vision blurred and the pound of blood in his ears blotted out every other sound.

Desperately, Markham got his bent arms under Tutul Xac's tight-pressed body and, with his elbows for leverage, pried upward. He felt the thin body yield unwillingly to the pressure and used the last ounce of his waning strength to drive one knee upward in a blind, vicious jab.

The priest's body jerked and then jerked again. There was a sound like the impact of a croquet mallet against a ball. The clutching fingers tore free from Markham's throat and the crushing weight rolled off his chest.

Reeling, gasping at the sharp sting of fresh air into his bruised throat, Markham got to his knees to see Tolkilla staring at him in mingled terror and relief. The golden breast plates now dangled from her hands and there was a fresh crimson stain along one edge. Tutul Xac lay motionless, blood oozing sluggishly from a gash across his dark forehead.

"Thanks," Markham panted, struggling to climb up onto his feet. "That makes our score even."

He snatched the breast plates and wheeled, in time to see the first rank of feathered warriors pour up over the rim. A wild yell of fury rose at the sight of their priest stretched over a puddle of his own blood. Roaring, they charged in a solid wall of flesh. For the moment, they seemed afraid to use their sun rays for fear of striking either Tutul Xac or Tolkilla.

"Come and get it!" Markham roared and stood, feet planted wide apart, swinging the linked breast plates in a vicious whistling arc. "Tolkilla, you'd better work your way around and get away before the boss wakes up and tells these blood-thirsty heathens that you sold him out to the enemy."

But Tolkilla was unconscious of his words. She was on her knees, head thrown back, eyes closed and every muscle of her glorious body frozen in an attitude of intense concentration.

MARKHAM was too busy to look around. The first wave of yelling warriors came within reach and he met the attack with deadly effect. The breast plates, whirling like a bludgeon, crushed through plumed head-dresses and light gold helmets to smash skulls beneath like egg-shells. Warrior after

Markham rolled and twisted, driving vicious blows until his vision blurred

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warrior went down under his blows, facing death rather than the risk of a stray blast of their weapons striking priest or priestess.

For a few moments it was slaughter. But for every attacker who fell, there were a dozen others to leap over the body. Slowly but inexorably, the sheer weight of their numbers drove Markham back, a step at a time, until his heels were out over the dizzying brink of the narrow platform, with nothing but the glistening ramp of the pyramid side and the hungry mouth of the well below.

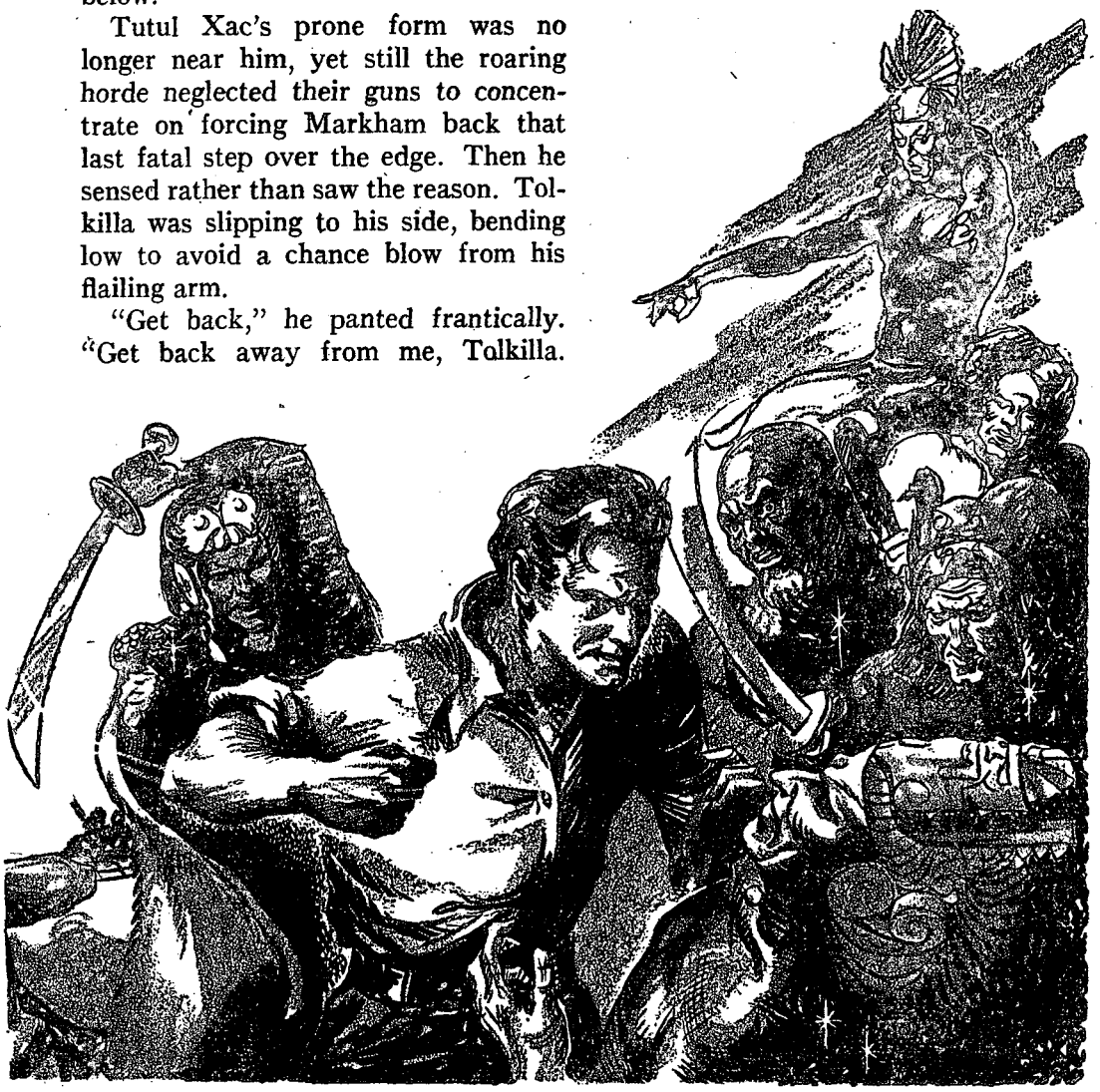
Tutul Xac's prone form was no longer near him, yet still the roaring horde neglected their guns to concentrate on forcing Markham back that last fatal step over the edge. Then he sensed rather than saw the reason. Tolkilla was slipping to his side, bending low to avoid a chance blow from his flailing arm.

"Get back," he panted frantically. "Get back away from me, Tolkilla. You're getting in my way and you're liable to get pushed over when they rush me."

"No, my Steven. That is not the way of escape. *This* is the only path to freedom for us."

With the words, she suddenly straightened, threw the full weight of her slender body against Markham's chest and hurled him back into empty space.

In the first sickening instant of the plunge, their two bodies spinning lazily downward, the one thought frozen into



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Markham's brain was that this was the end. Somehow, Tutul Xac still controlled Tolkilla's will and had driven her to suicide in a last desperate effort to accomplish the destruction of their enemy.

Clinging together, they struck the blood-stained slope of the pyramid with jarring impact and shot down its polished surface at breath-taking speed. It seemed to Markham that the gaping mouth of the well below was the maw of a hungry monster, opening to receive its prey.

He caught a split-second glimpse of a sea of upturned brown faces and a wailing *Aie-e-e-e-e* of vocal lament passed his ears like a breath. Then the mouth of the great well engulfed them and they plunged down into impenetrable blackness. It seemed to Markham in that instant of transition from sunlight to darkness that the whole world was falling with them, rushing down to the destruction of the inevitable fatal impact.

Abruptly the darkness was split by a shaft of golden light. The light swept up from unimaginable depths below and engulfed them and its touch was like a physical impact. The light itself seemed to be thickening, congealing around them so that the rate of their mad plunge was retarded. In another moment they were no longer falling at all but were floating swiftly but gently down the golden tunnel of light. Markham's senses reeled, as much at the miracle as at the sudden checking of their descent.

HE looked down and saw that they were nearing a black hole that penetrated one side of the well-shaft. As they neared this, it became the entrance to a horizontal tunnel leading off from the well. Opposite the mouth of this tunnel they came to a full stop and floated gently, incredibly in mid-shaft.

"What—what happened?" Markham gasped, finding words at last. "What stopped us?"

"Sun force, released from below," Tolkilla whispered. "It is the way my people travel from the plateau upon which the city is built down to the ledge where your flying ship landed. We of Chichen Chikin have known for ages how to harness the sun force and bend it to our purposes."

"B—but how—?"

"While you fought against the warriors, I projected my image to the Keeper Of The Force, far below, and ordered that he send up this beam to catch us. Because I am his Priestess, he dared not question or refuse. But we must get into the tunnel quickly, for when Tutul Xac recovers and learns of our escape, he will instantly order the beam cut off, hoping to dash us to the rocks at the bottom of the well."

"Getting out of here suits me," Markham grunted.

Taking his hand, Tolkilla began a paddling, swimming movement that drifted them gently to the narrow ledge at the tunnel's mouth. As Markham hauled himself out onto the solid rock, reaction to the nearness of destruction and to the unbelievable miracle of their escape gripped him. His knees buckled and cold sweat drenched his body.

He leaned against the rock wall for a moment, calming his nerves. As he straightened again, the golden beam in the well-shaft flicked off, leaving them in dense darkness.

"The beam," Tolkilla gasped, seizing his hand. "That means Tutul Xac has recovered and knows the direction and means of our escape. Come quickly, my Steven. We will rush to your flying ship and escape from the ledge before the warriors leap down the shaft in pursuit."

"Hold on a minute!" Markham

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barked, jerking his hand from hers. "You don't think I'm going to run away now and leave those hellish shafts up there to keep on shaking the earth until God knows what happens? If those terrible earthquakes keep on, there won't be any world left for us to flee to, anyhow."

"But we can escape—you and I. When the earth shakes, we can fly above it in your flying ship and when it has ended, we can land again upon a new world that will be all our own."

"But what *are* those quakes planned to accomplish?" Markham demanded, holding her trembling figure. "What is their goal, up there, in starting a catastrophe of that kind? Why were those pillars of metal built and started vibrating in the first place?"

"To bring back the moon."

THE calm matter-of-factness in her words, even more than the incredible answer, rocked Markham to his heels.

"Wha-a-at?"

"Or course. But I forgot that you had not been told the nature of the Great Attainment. Many ages ago, my people dwelt upon their great continent in the western ocean—the land that no longer exists."

"Mu!" Markham exclaimed. "The lost continent of Lemuria. Then the legends *are* true!"

"I know not that name," Tolkilla said simply, and continued: "My people built ships that flew through the air, borne by the power of the sun-force. At last they built a great ship, larger than any before, and in it a group of our greatest scientists flew up until they reached the moon which they had long desired to explore. But in landing, their great ship was smashed and when they came to rebuild it in order to return, they found that the sun-force on the moon was of a different character and could not be used for their power."

Markham nodded, completely absorbed in the vast scientific implications of the incredible tale.

"With no atmosphere on the moon, naturally the sun's rays would be different."

"So other scientists in my land started at once to construct another great ship with which to fly up and rescue those marooned on the great globe. But before the new ship could be completed, a great calamity visited the world and the land of my people vanished under the sea. With them went the unfinished rescue ship and all knowledge and plans."

"But how did your people know about the trouble on the moon? How did they know those scientists were still alive?"

"We visited them daily, of course, projecting our soul-form to them exactly as Tutul Xac and I projected ourselves to you. We still converse with them daily, for it is their wisdom and knowledge that is directing the Great Attainment."

"You mean . . ." Markham's eyes bulged in the darkness, "you mean those people on the moon are *still* alive—and that you and Tutul Xac talk to them?"

"Surely. After the catastrophe that destroyed the homeland, sparing only those of us who dwelt in this far colony, the scientists directed us to find this spot where the moon was torn from the earth many ages ago. Here, they told us, we would find the moon metal in great quantities for the construction of the shafts which would at last return our scientists to earth. So my people abandoned their great colonial cities and moved here, vanishing from the sight of mankind to fulfill our destiny."

Markham's brow felt feverish. It was all so hellishly, undeniably logical.

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Too logical to be idly dismissed as legend or fantasy.*

"Tolkilla," Markham whispered dazedly, "how were the shafts of vibrating moon metal supposed to affect the rescue of your scientists?"

"By shaking the earth with a regular rhythm until at last it was driven far enough from its course for the moon to be caught and drawn back."**

"My God!" The thought was like a cold hand squeezing at the pit of Markham's stomach. "But that would mean terrible earthquakes, floods, a smashing impact that would destroy all humanity."

"That is true. All except we who, upon this great rock, would be above the floods and cushioned against the quakes. The scientists have calculated everything. I do not understand most of it, but I know that the Great Attainment is so timed that the moon will strike upon the opposite side of the earth. The scientists themselves have constructed cushioned cells far in the heart of the moon in which they will stay, unharmed, until after the landing."

"IT'S insane!" Markham cried hoarsely. "You can't wipe out a whole civilization just to save the descendants of some ancient explorers."

"Not descendants, my Steven. The scientists who will return are the same ones who went, ages ago. We, who dwell within the influence of the life vibrations, remain ever youthful. That is the whisper which you hear constantly in the air, the pulsing of smaller spires within the pyramids."

"Tolkilla!" Markham's words were no more than a gasping whisper. "Tolkilla, how—how old are you?"

"Old?" She hesitated. "I know not, my Steven. But I was twenty-two years old when the Mother Land was destroyed and I moved here, within the sphere of the life-pulse."

Markham staggered back at her answer, a moan rising to his lips. This lovely, desirable creature thousands of years old? What would happen to her vibrant beauty, once she left the zone of life-renewing vibrations?

His shocked horror was swept away by a sharp cry from Tolkilla. In the absorption of their talk, both had forgotten for the moment the purely physical danger that still menaced.

"Steven! The beam! That means Tutul Xac and his warriors are leaping into the shaft to drop down here. We must flee down the tunnel at once."

Markham cast one look at the swirling, vaporous glow filling the well-shaft. Then he whirled and raced after Tolkilla into the blackness of the tunnel.

They took perhaps ten steps, running hand in hand, and then jolted to an abrupt halt.

Ahead of them, down the tunnel, another golden glow of light was growing, spreading, moving toward them. Markham's eyes identified it as the reflection of a sharp beam approaching around a distant bend in the tunnel.

* Science *is* puzzled over the complete disappearance of the Maya whose civilization exceeded any other of its era. Legends *do* tell of flying machines in use on the continent of Mu. And one of the leading theories of the moon's origin is that centrifugal force tore that satellite from the young earth during its more fluid, formative stage. It is easy to believe, then, that this geologically impossible pinnacle of rock with its core of the gleaming, unearthly metal, is the place of the last reluctant contact between earth and moon when that final separation took place.—Ed.

** Obviously Tolkilla is in error here, her conception of what actually is to take place not having been fully explained to her by the high priest. As a matter of fact, no power (beyond the rocket principle) located on the earth, could in any way affect the earth's position or motion. This would be like lifting yourself by your own bootstraps. However, it might be possible that some metallic magnetic attraction could be set up by these vibrating spires, and the same metal on the moon, thus causing a disruption of orbits.—Ed.

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And as they stood, uncertainly, their ears caught the whispered beat of running feet coming with the growing light.

"Trapped!" Tolkilla whispered hopelessly. "There is a smaller private shaft midway between the well and the outer ledge. Warriors have come that way also to block our escape. It is the end, my Steven. The end!"

CHAPTER IX

Fight for Life

THE approach of a menace that was physical, tangible, had a steadying effect on Markham's mind, wiping away the horror of the unbelievable things he had heard and seen. He was not, normally, a fighting man but now he welcomed the thought of conflict. It was a solid reality to cling to in a nightmare world of impossible unrealities.

He said grimly: "Maybe it is the end. But it's just the beginning of the damndest fight those birds ever got into. When they finally take us, they'll know they've taken something. You're sure there isn't a niche or a side passage around here to hide in?"

"Only a very short, unfinished section of tunnel just ahead. But the warriors know of its existence and they will send someone to search it thoroughly. It leads nowhere but to solid rock. There is no hiding place anywhere within it. We would be trapped there."

The light in the tunnel was growing stronger as the vengeful warriors approached the bend.

Markham could see Tolkilla quite clearly, now, although the dim light still gave her slender figure an appearance of unreality, like a phantom.

"*Hey!*" He whirled and dug impulsive fingers into her shoulders. "Can you project your—your image down here, the way you came to my apartment that time?"

"Yes, but—"

"Quick! Send your image down that tunnel to where they can see it. Make them think it's really you, trying to get away. Then, when they chase you, make your image decoy them into that blind tunnel. I'll bet you ten to one that the whole mob races in there and gives us a clear chance to duck past them down the main tunnel without being seen."

"Oh, I can! That will surely work. It is the way to freedom, my Steven."

She closed her eyes, went rigid in concentration. Markham held his breath. The light and the sound of running feet were very close to the last concealing turn.

And at any moment another horde of blood-thirsty fighters would come plummeting down the shaft of the well to trap them between the two forces. A single blast of the deadly sunlight force would mean their finish.

"Hurry!" he panted.

Abruptly the light down the tunnel wavered and the steady rhythm of pounding feet was broken. A chorus of wild yells echoed down the passage and then were suddenly muffled and distorted.

"You did it!" he cried as Tolkilla opened her eyes, swaying with exhaustion. "They've raced off into the blind tunnel. Come on. *Run!*"

HAND in hand they dashed forward. At the bend in the passage Markham drew Tolkilla back and crept cautiously forward.

He peered around the sharp turn and looked straight into the startled eyes of a warrior left alone to guard the main passage.

The warrior's mouth opened to bellow an alarm and his hand jerked at the sun-

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force weapon on his belt. Markham's driving fist caught the warning yell unuttered and drove it and numerous teeth back down the warrior's throat. Another blow to the angle of the bronzed jaw ended the fight before it had begun.

The small sounds of the scuffle were lost in the echoing yells of searchers inside the smaller passage. Markham snatched the sunlight case, hoisted the limp body to his shoulder and jerked his head for Tolkilla to follow.

"Come on. I'll drop this fellow down the passage a ways where he won't be discovered right away. In the general milling around when they come out of the blind tunnel, they may not miss him right away and we'll need every minute of time we can gain. Lead on to this smaller shaft you mentioned—the one these fellows used to flank us."

"Straight down this tunnel," Tolkilla said, and added hopefully: "This is also the way to your flying ship which we could use to escape."

"That will be something to remember after those spires are smashed once and for all," Markham growled.

A few yards down the corridor he laid his limp burden against the wall and raced after Tolkilla. As the darkness thickened, he followed her pattering footsteps, trusting her knowledge of the passage and her weird faculties to guide him. In his hand, the flat bulk of the captured sunlight gun was wonderfully comforting.

"Wish I had a flashlight," he grunted, stumbling over a heap of loose rock on the floor.

"A light?" Tolkilla's voice floated back to him. "I forgot that you have not the power to see with your mind as I do. On your weapon you will find a small button upon one side. Press that and you will produce a faint beam that gives light but has not the power to inflict burns."

"Hell!" Markham's exclamation of surprise turned to a grunt of satisfaction as his exploring fingers found and pressed the button. "This is better."

A dim, golden glow of light swept out from the blunt muzzle to flow along before him like a ball of luminous vapor.

"There is still another button," Tolkilla explained further, "that produces mild sun-stroke. That was used upon you out on the ledge when you sought to attack Tutul Xac."

"Thanks," Markham panted, "but from now on I'm playing for keeps. Anybody who tries to stop us is due to get the strongest beam this thing can put out."

A moment later he added grimly: "And that'll come too soon, I'm afraid. I can hear a lot of yelling behind us and it isn't getting any fainter."

THEY burst around another turn and into a great, domed rock chamber that swallowed their feeble light without revealing either walls or ceiling. Markham could see the shadowy outlines of boxes and bales piled high on each side of the path they were following.

"A storehouse," Tolkilla explained. "Sometimes men go out into the outer world and bring back things needed for our work."

"HEY!" Markham's eyes were glistening at the sight of a familiar, squat wooden box. "There's my dynamite. They must have lugged it in here from the plane."

He swerved, caught up a half-dozen of the deadly cylinders with caps and fuse and stuffed them into his pockets. "Now if I could only find my Luger—"

Behind them, the dark shaft of the tunnel erupted a burst of light and the tight-packed mass of half a hundred feathered warriors. At the sight of their victims, a great roar bellowed up toward the hidden dome of the chamber and

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a dozen light beams lanced out.

Markham, throwing himself in front of Tolkilla as a shield, felt the tingling impact of heat but nothing worse.

"Run!" Tolkilla sobbed, tugging him toward the black circle where their passage ran on from the far side of the big chamber. "Their weapons are not deadly at this range, but the warriors are trained to run swiftly."

Diving for the momentary protection of the further tunnel, Markham glanced back. The feathered horde was putting on a fresh burst of speed that was eating up the distance between pursuers and pursued with deadly haste.

To get more speed out of his own tortured legs was impossible. Already his lungs were sucking in liquid fire and his muscles were beginning to rebel against the insistent demands for more speed. Tolkilla, too, was wavering from the sapping exertion. It was only a matter of moments until one of the fleeter warriors, racing ahead, got close enough for one annihilating blast.

Markham's eyes caught the shadowy outline of his dynamite box, lying beside the path half-way between them and the racing warriors.

"Run!" he roared at Tolkilla. "Hold your ears and run for that next bend in the passage."

He leveled his sunlight gun at the distant box and pressed the lever.

B L A M-M-M-M!

The storehouse, the tunnel, the oncoming horde of warriors—all vanished in a blinding cloud of smoke and flame. An invisible, irresistible force, acrid with the fumes of powder and rock dust, plucked Markham from his feet and slammed him down the corridor into the rock wall of the bend with crushing force.

"STEVEN! Steven Markham, are you hurt?"

Markham shook the clouds from his brain and stumbled to his feet, leaning heavily on Tolkilla until his rubbery muscles stiffened. From the direction of the big chamber there was only an ominous silence, broken now and then by the sharp clatter of falling rock. There were no shouts, no sounds of movement. Not even a groan.

Markham found his sunlight case. It was uncomfortably hot and when he pressed the buttons, nothing happened. The force of the explosion had evidently unleashed the stored sun-force.

"Lead on," he said soberly, shocked by the vast destruction he had wrought. "We've got to get up that other shaft before Tutul Xac figures out what happened."

"It is but a short way ahead."

They went on toward another faint glow of light that grew into a narrow vertical shaft filled with the luminescence of the sun-force. The tunnel they were following skirted one edge of the shaft, around a narrow rock ledge, and vanished into the far wall.

"That is the passage out to where your flying ship is waiting," Tolkilla said hopefully, pointing to the other end of the ledge.

Markham ignored the hint.

"How can we make that light lift us up to the surface?" he demanded.

Tolkilla's face blanched.

"We—we cannot. I did not realize before—but I can no longer command the Keeper of the Force to raise us. He knows by now that I have become a—a traitor."

"Damn!" Markham glared at the lighted shaft. "Will that beam support our weight at this level?"

"Oh, yes. But it is only strong enough to stop a falling body opposite this passage. The lifting force has not been turned on."

To demonstrate, Tolkilla stepped

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from the ledge and floated gently in the golden radiance.

"In other words," Markham grunted, half to himself, "our bodies weigh practically zero at this ledge and the weight increases as we go up above the focal point. Are there other passages between here and the surface?"

"Only one. Half-way up there is a shorter one. From it stairs rise through the rock to the inner chamber of Tutul Xac's own private quarters. But that way is always guarded, night and day."

"Guards or no guards, it's worth a try. Come on."

He stepped clear of the ledge, caught hold of a bit of rock projecting from the rough shaft wall and pulled his weightless body upward. With a gasp of comprehension, Tolkilla floated to his side and dug slender fingers into the rock to match his progress.

FOR the first few yards it was easy, a mere matter of keeping their drifting bodies close to the wall and literally walking up with their hands. But the higher they climbed, the less support was offered by the dwindling beam and there was a corresponding increase in the weight of their bodies. Soon they were panting, bathed in perspiration, their fingers raw from the increasing effort necessary to keep pulling themselves higher.

"Here's—a—good—spot—to—rest," Markham panted at last, settling himself against a jagged outcropping that offered hand and foot-holds for them both. "How much farther?"

"Not far. But at any moment, Tutul Xac may order this beam cut off. Then we will fall helplessly to the rocks many thousands of feet below."

"That," Markham said through locked teeth, "is the thing I'm trying not to think about. Tell me, Tolkilla, just why are you, a High Priestess, fighting against your own people, helping me destroy a project you say they've been working on for centuries?"

In the semi-darkness, Tolkilla's eyes were luminous.

"Tell *me,* my Steven," she whispered. "Can't you read the answer to that question in your own heart?"

"But the first time we ever—er, met, you asked me to help you escape. Was that just bait to draw me here?"

"Tutul Xac thought so, but it was the truth. Long ago, before ever I saw you, I went out into your world and saw life and laughter and—and *love.* Those things I had never known in Chichen Chikin. I wanted, then, to be a part of that life, not to destroy it for the sake of a few old men on another world. I prayed, my Steven, that you would rescue me. For ages I have hated Tutul Xac, have rebelled against his cruelty in my heart. But always his will was too strong — until *you* came and lent strength to my spirit."

"When we get out of here," Markham began, "I promise you'll know all the things you—"

Behind them, the golden beam that still partially supported their aching bodies whipped out, blanketing them with impenetrable darkness.

Freed of all support, Markham's body dragged downward with fearful weight. His hands slipped and tore as they lost their grip on the rock. He felt a narrow point of rock and somehow got one arm hooked over it.

Beside him in the darkness he heard a quick rustle of movement and a gasp of terror. He threw out his free arm blindly and caught Tolkilla just as she was slipping from her slender perch. For a moment his one arm, crooked over the nub of rock, supporting both their bodies as they swung precariously over the dizzying depth. The agony of tearing weight on Markham's arm brought

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a sob of agony to his lips.

"My arm—is—slipping. Can't—hold—any longer," he gasped hoarsely. "Goodbye—Tolkil—"

His arm tore free of its slender hold.

CHAPTER X

Backs to the Wall

THEIR fall was barely beginning when the golden beam flashed back. The fatal plunge was instantly slowed and desperation gave Markham the strength he needed to claw a fresh grip on the rough stone. It was only a momentary arresting of their fall but it gave Tolkilla time to get a resting place. Freed of her added weight, Markham felt almost buoyant.

"The end is not yet," Tolkilla exulted. "Tutul Xac guessed we were in the shaft and turned off the beam so we would be plunged to destruction. But when our bodies failed to come crashing down, he thought he had guessed wrong. He turned the beam back on quickly, then, in order to rush more warriors down this shaft. They will come dropping down at any moment."

"Then climb as you never climbed before," Markham gritted.

He fairly hurled his aching body up the steep shaft, finding and using impossible handholds in his desperation. And Tolkilla, panting and sobbing from exhaustion, kept pace with his frantic ascent.

Abruptly they reached the tunnel ledge and hauled themselves out onto solid rock. They had barely time to drag their numbed bodies into the shadowy tunnel mouth when the shaft suddenly filled with a horde of feathered warriors, flashing down past their hiding place to the passage below. Only the speed of their descent and grim concentration on their goal below kept the warriors from spying the two exhausted figures stretched on the middle ledge.

"Come on," Markham groaned when the warriors had all hurtled past. "We've got to run. They'll discover any moment that we aren't down below and then no place will be safe from search. Lead on to those stairs."

It seemed to Markham that he ran for hours through inky blackness, guided only by Tolkilla's hand and the patter of her feet. At last they slowed and crept, hand in hand to the edge of a lighted chamber at the foot of a mounting stairway. Two feathered guards, sunlight guns in their hands, stood alertly at the foot of the stairs. Across the chamber loomed the black mouth of another tunnel, the continuation of the one they were in.

Slipping past those guards unnoticed was sheer impossibility. But somehow they had to get up those stairs and get up quickly before pursuit closed in again. And there was no other way to reach those quivering shafts of destruction far above.

"Hold your breath," Markham whispered.

He caught up a handful of rock fragments from the floor and began to toss them, one at a time, into the opposite tunnel mouth. The fallen pebbles set up a ripple of faint echoes like the clatter of footsteps. Both guards jerked up their weapons and whirled toward the other tunnel.

Markham held his breath until, after an exchange of puzzled whispers, the two guards crept toward the black tunnel mouth to investigate. As they halted there, light beams probing the passage, their backs were turned toward Markham.

"While we're fighting," Markham whispered, "get by and race upstairs.

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Smash those shafts—for my sake."

Then he spun and raced on his toes toward the unsuspecting guards.

A RUSTLE of his movement reached their ears. They whirled, tried to center their weapons on the plunging figure but Markham was already too close. His crooked arms darted out and encircled two bronzed necks. For a moment they reeled and shuffled in a grim dance of death.

Then Markham got the leverage he wanted. Two plumed heads crashed together with sickening impact and the two figures went limp in his arms.

"Round one," he exulted and dropped the lifeless bodies, tossing one of the captured weapons to Tolkilla.

Side by side they raced up the carved stairs and burst out through a curtain of hanging silks into a huge chamber that was much like the one in which Markham had been held prisoner.

A startled guard whirled at their noisy entrance and snatched at the sunlight gun in his belt. Markham's beam lashed out mercilessly and the guard went down with a gaping hole seared through his breast.

Nauseated, Markham hurdled the reeking body and raced after Tolkilla toward an arched doorway. On the threshold he turned and blasted the deadly, concentrated sunlight around the room in quick, sharp bursts of blinding light. Curtains, draperies, cushions burst into flame.

"Might — raise enough — hell — to —delay—any—pursuers," he panted.

They sped down dark, silent corridors, between huge formless stone statues that towered up into the darkness above like vengeful entities. Another door burst open at their impact and tumbled them out into the open air, under the radiance of a silvery moon that seemed to hang almost within arm's length, turning the night into blazing brilliance.

"Steven!" Tolkilla's warning cry rang sharply.

A dozen plumed figures poured out of the shadows. Markham dropped to his knees a split-second ahead of a golden beam that lashed the air where he had been, spraying his face with fiery needles of intense heat.

Then his own beam was lashing back, cutting down the startled guards. Beside him, Tolkilla crouched low, the gun in her own slender hand adding its blazing flare to Markham's relentless fire.

The last guard went down but the night was awake with the sudden echo of pounding feet as other warriors rushed to answer their comrades' shouts. Markham's shoulder was throbbing to the searing agony of a beam's caress but he was hardly conscious of the pain.

With Tolkilla beside him, he raced away from the thunder of approaching feet, diving into the denser shadows for cover, skirting close to the square buildings and the smaller pyramids.

"Close your mind," Tolkilla panted a warning. "Do not think intensely about anything—especially your own plans or your goal. Tutul Xac's mind will be questing for your thought vibrations to betray your movements."

"Hell!" Markham cursed. "I never thought of that and my mind has been practically shouting everything I'm trying to accomplish."

"We can only pray that he has so far missed your thought-pictures."

"Take me the shortest way to the other metal shaft," Markham whispered. "Not the one by the altars but the other one, across the city. That one might not be guarded so closely and destroying it would accomplish my purpose just as well. Neither one will

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do the job without the other."

FOR the moment they seemed to have shaken off pursuit. Then Markham's breath caught at the sight of the second great pyramid a short way ahead, its slender silver finger lifting beckoningly toward the eager moon overhead.

Behind them a plume of black smoke billowed up, hiding the stars. An angry crimson glow tinged the bottom of that cloud and the wailing of innumerable voices rose on the air. The fire started by Markham's weapon seemed to have spread and drawn a large share of the population.

"Come on!" Markham cried. "Whatever happens to us now, we've got to get one good blast at that spire, either with sunlight beams or my dynamite. Anything to break up those vibrations and ruin the pitch of the shaft."

"Wait," Tolkilla laid a restraining hand on his arm and held him in the shadows. "There may be a trap laid for us at the pyramid. I will project my image on ahead to investigate."

While Markham fidgetted with impatience, she stiffened into deep concentration. A moment later his staring eyes saw a second Tolkilla, different only in a shimmering mistiness, move through the shadows toward the looming bulk of the pyramid. Markham held his breath as the phantom drifted across a patch of open moonlight and raced up the stone steps.

He saw her there, moving about, for some time. Then she vanished and beside him, the real Tolkilla stirred and sighed.

"All clear?" Markham demanded eagerly. "Come on."

"Wait!" Her voice was sharp with bewilderment. "There is no one in sight, no signs of a trap. And I am certain no guards are concealed close enough to reach us with the light beams. But I am afraid, my Steven—terribly afraid. It is not natural or right for the spire of the Great Attainment to be left so unguarded when everyone in Chichen Chikin would lay down his life to protect it."

"Nonsense," Markham growled impatiently. "The whole crowd is demoralized by our escape and by the fire that's spreading. They don't know what they're doing tonight. Come on, before some guards do show up."

Heedless of her protests, he raced forward, sunlight gun in hand. A moment later his feet were pounding up the stone stairs toward the towering finger of moon metal far above. Tolkilla, racing beside him, moaned in terror.

"Please, my Steven—"

Bam!

The smashing report and the accompanying spurt of crimson flame leaped at them from the shadows of a huge building several hundred yards away. Something that was like a white-hot hammer slammed the back of Markham's head. He stumbled, heard Tolkilla's scream rising as from a great distance, and plunged forward in the swirling black clouds of unconsciousness that swept up to engulf him.

His last visual impression was of tumbling over and over down the long steps, of hearing another shot from the Luger, and of seeing Tolkilla throw up her hands, spin around and fall in a crumpled heap.

CHAPTER XI

The Doomed Land

MARKHAM could not have been unconscious more than a few seconds. When he opened his eyes, he was still lying head downward on the steps with Tolkilla close by. And down

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below, hundreds of feathered warriors with Tutul Xac at their head, were racing toward the foot of the pyramid's stairs. The lean priest's clawed right hand was holding the Luger with all the casual ease of a trained marksman.

This was not too surprising, considering the fact that Tutul Xac had been able to project himself out into the world at any time or place, to study and absorb knowledge at his leisure. He might even have had guns brought in from the outer world for study and practice.

The trap itself was horribly clear to Markham now. Instead of lurking at the base of the pyramid, within range of their sunlight guns, the warriors had withdrawn beyond chance of discovery and depended upon the long range Luger to snap the death trap for them. Beyond a doubt, Tutul Xac had caught Markham's unconscious thoughts and had been perfectly aware that this was his goal.

Markham stirred painfully and saw that Tolkilla's eyes were open.

"You are alive," she whispered joyfully. "I pretended to be struck in order to lure Tutul Xac within range of my sun weapon."

"Brave kid," Markham whispered.

His heart was leaping with new courage. Tutul Xac was not such a deadly shot after all. He had completely missed Tolkilla and his shot at Markham had no more than creased the back of his skull.

The racing warriors were close—but not yet quite close enough for beams of deadly sunlight to be effective.

Markham fumbled cautiously in his pocket while Tolkilla stared in wonder. Abruptly a match flame broke into brilliance in his hands and the sight brought a roar of surprised fury from the charging mob below. Markham surged to his knees and used every ounce of his strength to hurl a sputtering dynamite stick, straight up toward the top of the pyramid where a group of bronzed warriors, appearing out of nowhere, were charging down to pin the two between their ranks.

There was no time to speculate on how the new group of attackers had reached the top. The explosion of the dynamite was hurling terrible thunder into the sky, smashing helpless warriors into bits, when Markham snatched out another stick.

From below came the *bam-bam* of the Luger. A slug screamed from the steps in front of Markham's face, filling eyes with rock splinters. Another thudded solidly into a step beside him.

"Up!" Markham roared, leaping to his feet. "Run for the top! Those babies up there are disorganized anyhow. And keep twisting so a bullet can't hit you."

STRAIGHT at the disorganized warriors above they ran. Markham hurdled a torn body and raced on, furiously capping another dynamite stick. Tolkilla's light ray lashed the life from a warrior above and the others fell back beyond the rim. Behind them, the beams of their attackers from below were heating the rocks underfoot to molten agony.

Running, dodging, twisting, Markham lit and hurled another dynamite stick, ignoring the pursuers below to concentrate on his goal of blasting the deadly vibrating spire above. The blast nearly swept them from the steps but it discouraged any resistance from above. Another dynamite stick, thrown back down the steps this time, did horrible damage to the front ranks of the charging mob. There was not time to see if Tutul Xac was among the victims.

Markham snatched out another dynamite stick and realized with a sink-

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ing heart that it was his last. This one *had* to smash the moon metal spire.

They raced up onto the pyramid's top. Three surviving warriors sprang at them but their sunlight guns seemed useless, probably shattered. Tolkilla's beam cut down two of them in mid-stride.

Markham dodged the plunge of the third, hunched over a match flame for a moment and then hurled his last stick of dynamite straight at the base of the slender spire. The mushrooming explosion rocked the pyramid under their feet and for a moment flame and smoke hid the deadly spire.

Then a sob tore through Markham's set teeth. The tall shaft seemed unharmed, although the rock at its base was shattered to bits. It seemed almost as though the moon metal was impervious to the terrible destructive fury of the blast.

"Tolkilla! Quick, the sunlight on the spire!"

He snatched his own weapon, felt it torn from his hands. The surviving warrior was upon him, knocking the weapon from his hand.

In that agonizing second, Markham saw Tolkilla pounding frantically against the golden lever of her own weapon, but the gun was either damaged or empty.

And over the pyramid's brink now poured a maniacal horde of screaming, yelling warriors, survivors of Markham's dynamite attack, thirsty for the blood of their enemies. Tutul Xac himself was in the lead, mad flames leaping in his black eyes.

Markham drove off his adversary with a hail of smashing blows and then launched himself straight at Tutul Xac's charging figure.

THEY met with bone-shattering impact. The priest's steel fingers clawed at Markham's throat. The geologist tore free, drove a whirlwind of smashing, scientific blows into the thin hawk face before him. Warriors, ringing their battling figures, sought to break in and tear Markham away from his enemy. From the corner of his eye he saw Tolkilla helplessly pinned in the grasp of massive warriors.

Abruptly Markham stiffened and threw up his hands while a shriek of sheer agony burst from his lips.

Louder, stronger, more terrible than ever before came the agonizing doom-sound—the nerve-shattering drone of the great spire in full vibration. Before its flaming torture, Markham's brain reeled helplessly and his muscles turned to water.

Then suddenly the agony lifted. The piercing drone deepened, changed to an audible whine that dropped with terrible speed to a full-toned rumble of super-sound.

The warriors and Tutul Xac, who had been paralyzed by Markham's unexpected actions, fell back with cries of fright at the roaring sound. Underfoot, the heavy rock of the pyramid's cap heaved and pitched and split apart. For a moment it seemed to Markham that the whole universe was rocking dizzily to the rhythm of that terrible sound.

The movement was too much for the warriors. With yells of terror they broke and raced down the rocking, pitching steps—steps that broke under their feet and opened gaping pits of death. Tutul Xac, snarling in rage, raced after them.

"The spire," Markham cried. "The dynamite couldn't crack it but it set up new vibrations, all out of pitch. It's shaking Chichen Chikin apart. Run!"

He caught Tolkilla's trembling figure and raced down the steps, hurdling gaping cracks, dodging and staggering and

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somehow reaching the solid ground beneath unharmed.

"To the shaft," Markham shouted. "Lead us to the shaft. We've got to get down and into the plane before the whole plateau shakes apart. There's no telling what the new vibrations will do."

They fled down the pitching, rocking street, past screaming mobs who ignored their presence as they raced helplessly up and down the cracking streets of the doomed city.

"IN here, my Steven."

They darted through an opening an instant before the wall itself collapsed. At their feet was the mouth of the smaller shaft, still alight with the golden radiance of the beam. At any moment that force might be shut off or wrecked by the mounting fury of the quake.

But there was no time to hesitate. To stay longer in the city was certain death, for there was no question now in Markham's mind but what the terrible quake he had inadvertently started would continue until the whole fantastic land tumbled down.

Hand in hand, they leaped into the pit and hurtled downward into the heart of the golden beam.

Rock tumbled around them and only the lifting force of the beam saved them from serious injury. Even in midshaft they could feel the impact of the deadly vibrations whose quivering terror filled the universe.

"The tunnel," Tolkilla cried at last.

They floated to a stop and plunged into the dark passage. Rocks shaken from walls and ceiling hampered their progress and menaced their lives. But miraculously they made it at last and burst out onto the rock ledge.

Markham thought then that he had never seen a more beautiful picture in all his life than the sight of his plane, limned in the moonlight, resting on the shuddering, cracking shelf.

"Run!" he shouted to Tolkilla. "This whole shelf may break apart at any moment."

They raced toward the plane.

They were still twenty feet from its sleek side when the propeller abruptly whirled in an arc, hesitated and then vanished into a blur of incredible speed. The shrill whine of the starter merged into the thundering drone of the engine under full throttle.

"Tutul Xac!" Tolkilla sobbed. "He knows how to operate the ships that fly."

The plane was already beginning to move, to crawl forward across the lurching shelf. Markham caught Tolkilla's arm, surged forward in a great leap and caught at the handle of the cabin door. Running beside the accelerating plane, he somehow got the door open, shoved Tolkilla through onto the cabin floor and hauled himself in beside her.

Tutul Xac, in the pilot's seat, turned an insanely twisted face and shouted unintelligible hatred. The blunt muzzle of a sunlight gun peeped at them over the back of the seat. Markham read their death warrant in the flaming eyes, the twisting lips that peeled back from the priest's glittering teeth.

"Don't!" Markham roared. "For God's sake, you'll blast off the whole tail of the ship, you fool!"

HE caught at the leg of one of the wicker passenger seats and jerked. The light seat tore loose from the thin bracket that held it screwed to the floor. Markham hurled it toward the front of the ship without taking time even to rise from his prone position.

Tutul Xac shrieked something and pressed the trigger of the sunlight gun. At the same instant, the flying seat smashed into his arm.

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Light as the seat was, it had enough momentum to drive the priest's weapon back and upward at the instant the beam lashed out. There was a scream from the priest, broken off in mid-note, a single incredibly-brilliant burst of golden light, and then blackness.

Until moonlight, pouring in through the gaping hole seared through the roof of the plane's cabin, flooded down upon the headless horror that had been Tutul Xac.

The plane, unmanned and with the controls jammed by the priest's dead body, was bounding erratically toward the rim of the ledge with increasing speed. Markham leaped forward, wrestled the gruesome thing from the seat and grabbed the wheel.

A moment later the roaring plane dipped over the edge, plummeted downward until it picked up flying speed and then leveled off.

Behind them, thundering echoes rocked the night as the whole titanic plateau of Chichen Chikin burst asunder and roared down to earth.

A LONG time afterward, with Tutul Xac's body slid out of the cabin to the wilderness below and the plane headed for Texas and home, a terrible thought struck Markham. It was a thought that had subconsciously haunted him throughout the whole mad night.

"Tolkilla," he whispered, stiff-lipped, to the figure nestled in the curve of his arm. "Tell me, will you go on living forever, even with the vibrations destroyed?"

She smiled up at him, touching the seared heat-burn along his cheek with tender fingers.

"Of course not, my Steven. Now I can take up my life as a human being. I was twenty-two years old when I first received the vibrations of eternity. I am twenty-two now—for the last time. We can grow old together, my Steven."

Markham hesitated, wet his lips.

"You're *entirely* human, now? Does that mean you can't—can't project your image or read thoughts."

Tolkilla's smile was enigmatic.

"That, too, has been taken from me—lost forever when the great spires toppled."

"Thank God!" Steve Markham breathed fervently, then. "After all, a man has to have *some* secrets—even from his wife."

Perfumed Psychology

By GUY FAULDES

THE Asiatic races have long used various scented perfumes for medicinal purposes. Claiming that sweet scents quiet the nerves and aid digestion, Asiatics relax after meals by leisurely inhaling their favorite perfumes.

This practice is contended to create a relaxation of mental strain which in turn is supposed to produce a state of contentment highly beneficial to digestive tracts.

And still speaking of perfumed psychology, it has been a century-old custom in the harems of the Far East for Sultans to turn their new wives over to a gentleman called "The Master of Fragrance." It is this worthy's duty—inasmuch as he is an expert in the chemicals of perfumes—to make a thorough analysis of the damsels' varied personality traits and prepare an exclusive perfume for each.

These personal perfumes then not only express the individual charms of each wife forever, but completely distinguish her for the rest of her life from all other damsels.

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THUNDER OVER WASHINGTON

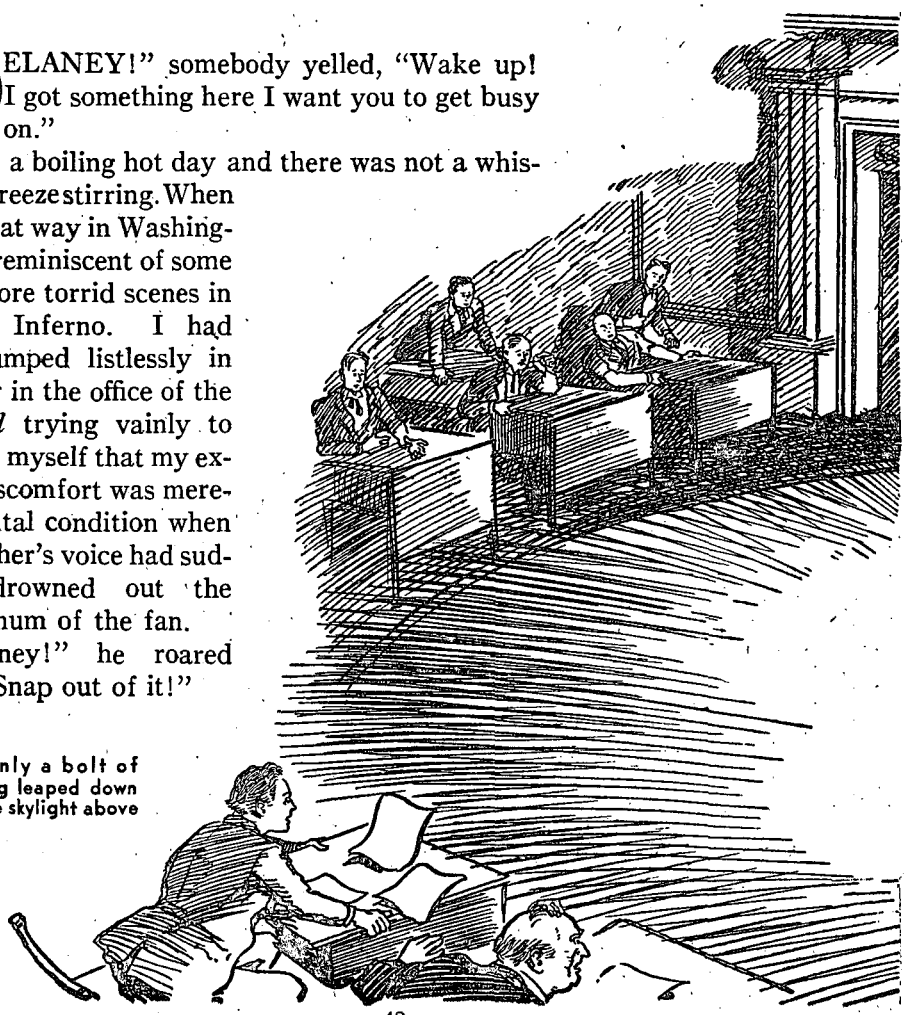
by William P. McGivern

It was a mighty fine gesture of friendship and peace that the Ussarian government was making—but it was off-color somewhere . . .

"DELANEY!" somebody yelled, "Wake up! I got something here I want you to get busy on."

It was a boiling hot day and there was not a whisper of a breeze stirring. When it gets that way in Washington it is reminiscent of some of the more torrid scenes in Dante's Inferno. I had been slumped listlessly in my chair in the office of the *Standard* trying vainly to convince myself that my extreme discomfort was merely a mental condition when Der Fueher's voice had suddenly drowned out the drowsy hum of the fan.

"Delaney!" he roared again, "Snap out of it!"



Suddenly a bolt of lightning leaped down from the skylight above

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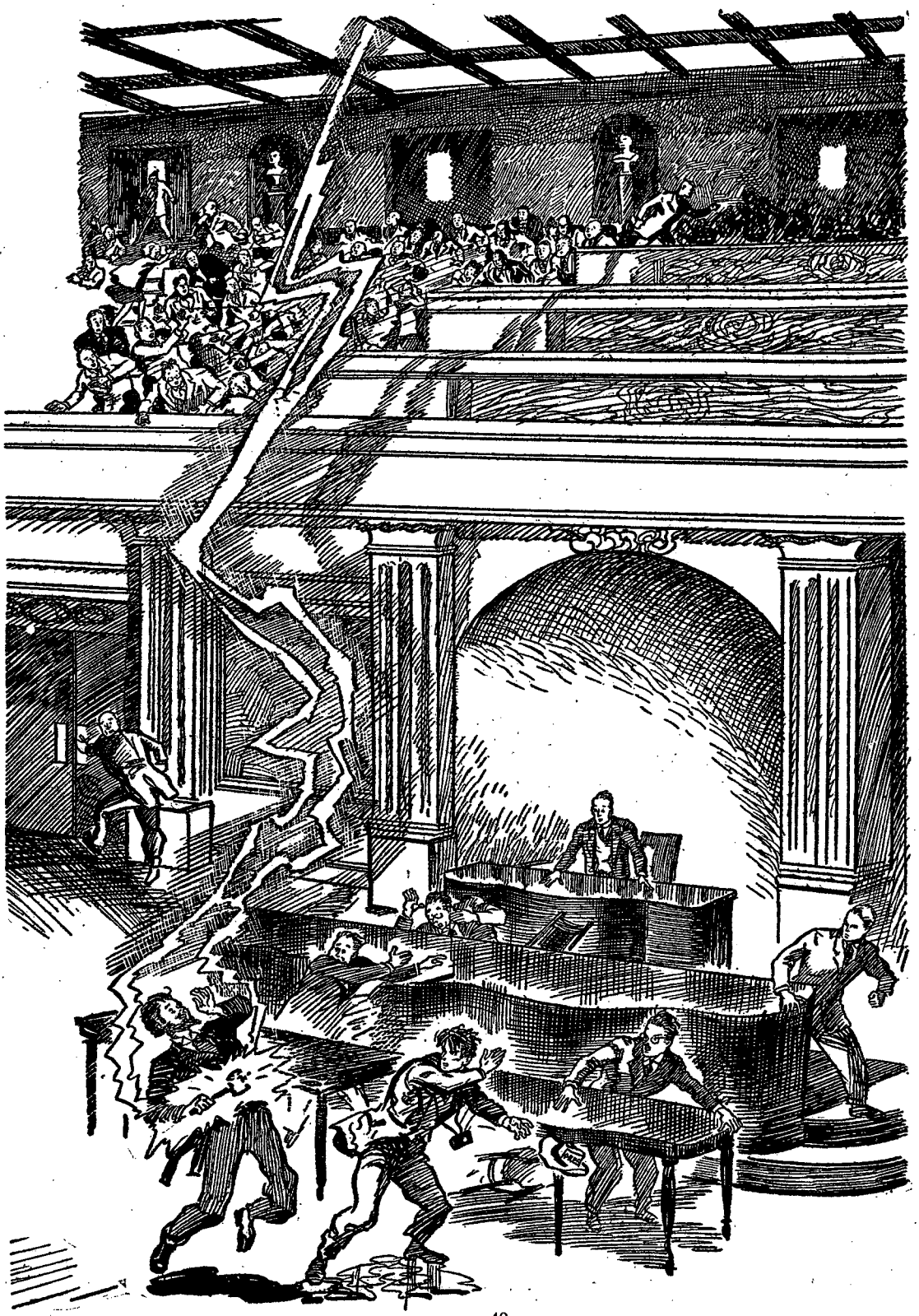

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I opened my eyes and swore feebly. I thought desperately of dying on the spot to avoid going to work but I finally discarded the idea with a sigh. The only thing wrong with it was that I'd be darned if I'd give the paper a feature story for nothing. I climbed unhappily to my feet and slouched over to the City Ed's desk.

He was working cheerily in his shirt sleeves apparently oblivious to the heat. He looked up at me and smiled.

"Going to be a warm one today," he said contentedly.

"Going to be?" I echoed hollowly. "If it gets any hotter the lizards will break out with prickly heat."

The Chief paid scant attention to my suffering.

"I've got a hunch," he said, "that I just stumbled across a little something that might cook into a nice yarn."

I winced at the word cook, but because the Chief's hunches are kind of miraculous I forgot the heat long enough to get interested.

"What's the dope?" I asked, settling myself on the corner of his desk.

"Just this," he said. "The embassy of the Ussarian government is presenting a special gavel to the Senate tonight. It will be used for the first time tonight in the special session that's been called to discuss these war-aid bills. It's been ballyhooed as a sort of good-will gesture, and as an indication of the warm and lasting friendship between the nations and all that sort of bunk."

"I read about it," I said. "What's the angle?"

"That's what I want you to find out," the Chief grinned. "The government of Ussar has been sitting on the sidelines and playing both ends against the middle until no one can be sure of what they're out for. But one thing is certain. They haven't any love for us and they'd stab us in the back the minute they got the chance. So that's why this presentation of a new gavel and all that boloney about lasting friendship sounds screwy as the devil."

"Maybe so," I said anxiously, "but it's no job for a reporter. This is State Department stuff. Why don't you tell them about it and let me go back to sleep."

"Because," the Chief said softly, "the State Department is not on my payroll, but *you* are. I want some kind of a feature on the presentation of this new gavel. If there's an eightball in the wood pile it's your job to roll it out where we can see it."

I felt like telling him that he'd been reading too many Thrilling Spy stories, but some kind Providence must protect me in moments like that, for I didn't. Instead I said:

"Okay. I'll get your feature, but don't expect me to find a huge net of intrigue and mystery wrapping its tentacles about the White House. This is Washington and not the first chapter of a wild novel about fifth columnists and the Red Menace."

"I know this is Washington," he snapped, "but you apparently don't. This is the capital of the most powerful nation in the world and if you don't think that every move of the foreign embassies here is important, you've got no business masquerading as a reporter."

The Chief is very odd on some points. One thing in particular is his queer idea that Washington is full of hot news. Hot air maybe, but not hot news.

"Okay," I said for the second time, "I'll get busy."

I stuck my hat on the back of my head, waved a not-particularly-fond farewell to the Chief and left the office.

I HOPPED in a cab, gave the driver the address of the Ussarian legation,

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and settled back to think. As much as I disliked to admit it, the Chief's hunch was queerly reasonable. Ussar was, diplomatically speaking, squarely perched on top of the international fence. But there was little doubt in anyone's mind that when she did leap down and join the party it would be on the opposite side of the fence from the whiskered guy in the red, white and blue suit. So why all this sudden love and kisses?

I shrugged mentally and decided to stop worrying until I had something to worry about. I closed my eyes and thought wistfully of the lucky girls at the World's Fair who were frozen in ice five times every working day. The cab stopped after a while and I climbed out, paid the driver, and walked into the offices of the Ussarian legation.

A be-whiskered clerk in a black suit bowed to me from a receptionist desk and asked me what I wanted.

I showed him my press card and told him.

He beamed broadly. His black whiskers parted and his two rows of large white teeth showed through the underbrush.

"Oh yes, yes, yes," he cried emotionally. "Tonight we present the gavel to your government. It is a great manifestation of the mutual friendship and aims of two great nations."

"Banana oil," I muttered.

He arched a hairy eyebrow at me.

"What?"

"Nothing," I said quickly. "Where's the gavel now?"

"Oh the gavel is not as yet arrived," he explained importantly. "It will arrive at the airport in a few minutes on the special plane from Ussar. All the members of the legation, except myself, are on hand to commemorate the glorious occasion of its safe arrival."

I thanked him and left. Some of my enthusiasm was dwindling. I was convinced now that there was no ulterior designs or purposes lurking in the minds of the bewhiskered ministers from Ussar. The heat was still practically unbearable as I climbed into another cab and gave the driver directions.

As we approached the airport I heard a muted throbbing growing louder above me so I peeked out the side of the car just in time to see a huge bi-motored transport nosing down for a landing. I knew that no commercial planes were scheduled to arrive at this time so with my usual brilliant reasoning I deduced that I was watching the arrival of the plane carrying the good-will gavel from Ussar.

I told the driver to stop and I climbed out to get a good gander at the plane as it soared down to the landing field. I was squinting up as it passed over me, trying to get a clear look at its construction when suddenly an amazing thing occurred.

From the cloudless expanse of blue sky overhead a lightning bolt flashed a blazing crimson fork across the nose of the settling plane. The plane swerved suddenly but continued to settle toward the landing field.

Before I could let loose a yell of astonishment another brilliantly blinding flash slashed past the plane. Two terrific bomb-like bursts of thunder followed, shaking the ground like I was standing on a mound of jelly.

THE plane dipped suddenly and headed for the ground at a sharp angle. I held my breath as it plowed toward the earth at an almost impossible landing speed. But the pilot must have been related to the original Wright brothers, because at the last instant the nose of the plane came up and the ship pancaked to a hard, but safe landing.

My knees were clacking together like

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castenets by this time. The cab driver leaned out of the side of his car and scratched his head bewilderedly.

"Thunder and lightning," he muttered. "It ain't right. There ain't a cloud in the sky, nor a drop of rain between here and New York."

I was thinking hard about those two vivid forks of lightning myself. Of course it was probably an ordinary electrical phenomenon but it had certainly seemed as if those bolts of lightning had been *aimed* at the Ussar plane.

I shook my head to shake out the screwy ideas that were roosting there. If I kept it up I'd get like the Chief, looking for wild, fantastic stories in every commonplace occurrence.

I climbed back into the cab and we drove onto the landing field. I could see the Ussarian plane, motors still idling, surrounded by a bevy of diplomats, photographers and airline officials. We were still a few hundred yards from the plane when I saw two or three of the Ussarian diplomats separate themselves from the crowd and hurry to a huge black touring car that was parked twenty or thirty feet from the plane.

They all climbed in, the doors slammed, the motor roared to life and the huge car moved swiftly away.

"Step on it!" I yelled to my driver, "there goes my story."

The cab surged forward, but by the time we reached the rope barriers that separated the landing field from the parking lot, the Ussarian embassy car was disappearing around the bend of the road that led from the airport on the opposite side of the field.

I climbed out and cursed fluently. It was irritating enough to be sent out on a juvenile assignment on a day that wasn't fit for any human being, but to have the thing settle into a hare-and-hound proposition . . .

I realized wearily that the Ussarian delegates had probably collected their thrice-cursed gavel and were now speeding back to their legation with it. Which meant I would have to trail them back there and listen to stupid, official statements enunciated as if they were worthy of being stamped out on solid gold tablets.

The airline officials had disappeared into their haunts, the grease monkeys were climbing over the plane and the only other human beings left were a small, harried looking man who was checking a long list of figures and the pilot who had brought the plane into the field.

Seeing him reminded me of the peculiar lightning flashes that had flashed past the plane when he was landing.

I told the cabby to wait a minute, and sauntered over to the plane.

THE pilot was climbing off one of the wings as I approached. He was a small, toughly built young fellow with a heavy dark beard. He was wearing regulation flying togs and the glasses of his helmet were shoved high on his forehead displaying black, unwinking eyes.

"That was a nice landing," I said conversationally. "I thought for a minute you might have a little trouble straightening out."

He smiled faintly and then peered carefully into the clear vast stretches of white sky. When he looked back at me there was a puzzled uncertain look in his eye. In spite of the heat he looked as if he might start shivering.

"I've been flying for quite a while," he said, almost to himself, "and I've never seen anything like it."

"Like what?" I prompted gently.

"Thunder and lightning," he muttered, shaking his head. "From the

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minute I took the ship up in California until I just pulled in now, the sky has been full of lightning, popping around the ship and shooting in front of it. I've never seen anything like it. And the funny thing about it is that it all happened in a perfectly clear sky."

"Very peculiar," I said. "Was it just around your ship that you noticed it?"

He looked at me in surprise.

"That's right. It was just like we were a flying lightning rod, attracting every bolt that appeared in the sky right smack to us."

I stood there undecided. It didn't really make sense. But there was probably some very obvious scientific explanation of the phenomena. I might have stood there talking to the fellow until I had really gotten interesed in his story, but just at that minute a startled, horrified squawk sounded behind me.

I turned and saw that the bleat had originated from the little fellow who had been checking the list of the plane's cargo when I arrived.

He was staring in undiluted horror at the list in his hand and from his mouth were issuing incoherent gasps of dismay.

"What's the trouble?" I asked.

"This is absolutely terrible," he moaned. "I've never done a thing like this in all the years I've been working here. It's the first blot on a blameless record."

"What is?" I asked.

"I got two shipments mixed," he explained breathlessly. "I gave the delegates from Ussar the wrong package and I gave Professor Stiles the package which the delegates were expecting."

"That was the gavel wasn't it?" I asked hopefully.

The little shipping clerk nodded miserably.

"The Professor has the gavel now and has probably taken it back to the University by this time." He paused to swallow and wring his hands together helplessly. "I shall never, never live this down. If it weren't such an important matter it wouldn't be so tragic."

He stopped suddenly and peered quickly about. The grease monkeys and the pilot had disappeared. My cab driver was parked out of earshot.

After his careful inspection he breathed relievedly.

"This just has to be kept under cover," he whispered to me in a conspiratorial tone. It wouldn't do to let the papers get hold of this."

I nodded seriously.

"You're absolutely right," I said, "it just wouldn't do."

I turned then and trotted over to my cab and climbed in.

"University," I snapped to the driver.

The little man followed me bewilderedly.

"W—who are you?" he asked tremulously.

I smiled out of the cab window.

"Delaney of the *Standard*," I said sweetly. "Toodle-oo."

The little fellow collapsed quietly as the cab shot off toward the University.

I DIDN'T really have a story, at least not one to get excited about, but I could do a yarn on the mix-up at the airport that would satisfy the boss. I'd have to get the facts from the Professor, find out what he had been expecting, what he thought when he discovered the mistake, etc.

We drew up in front of the University a few minutes later and I paid the cabby and dismissed him. The University grounds flanked the new army training camp and I headed for a cluster of ivy-clad buildings which were just a few hundred feet from rows of canvas tents. By asking a few students I learned that Professor Stiles had just returned from

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the airport, was probably now working in the physics building over there.

I thanked my informants and walked over to the building. Inside I followed a corridor until I came to an open door that led into a magnificently equipped laboratory. Standing next to a wide lab table in the center of the room was a tall, spare old man with straight white hair and keenly bright blue eyes.

"Pardon me," I said, "but I just wanted—"

"Ssssssshh," he hissed. "I'm busy. Come back tomorrow. Or next week."

I saw then that he was holding a peculiarly-shaped hammer in his hand and peering intently at it. I guessed it must be the Ussarian good-will gavel.

"Kind of surprised to find that, weren't you?" I asked.

Considering his age he wheeled on me with surprising alacrity.

"Do you know something about this?" he demanded excitedly.

"A little," I told him. "It was shipped in from Ussar and is to be presented to the Senate in special ceremonies tonight to be used as a good-will gavel."

The Professor peered at the gavel in his hand and then back at me.

"This is positively incredible," he murmured. "I wouldn't believe it unless I saw it myself. There is only one more thing necessary to make me positive that my conclusions are correct."

"What conclusions?" I asked blankly.

"Wait here," he said imperatively, disregarding my question. He laid the gavel carefully on the desk. "See that no one disturbs this. I'll be back in a few minutes."

He bobbed his head at me and scuttled from the room like an excited crab.

I SHRUGGED and picked up the hammer. It was curiously designed with a large, blunt mallet and a short staff. It was surprisingly light. I wondered why the Professor had gotten so excited about it. I was growing more disgusted by the minute on the prospects of getting a decent story from this business. Everything so far had merely been a welter of confusion and mixup.

I noticed then something that irritated me as much as anything that happened all day. On the wall that faced the army camp was a picture hung at a screwy crooked angle. For some psychological reason I am nervously allergic to crooked pictures.

I strode across the room and straightened the picture with a jerk. But I used a little more strength than judgment and the nail holding the picture pulled out of the plaster. I swore under my breath, picked up the nail from the floor and jabbed it back into the plaster. It stuck, but in such a wobbly fashion that I knew it wouldn't hold.

I was holding the good-will gavel in my hand and I decided to use it for a hammer. One little tap or two certainly wouldn't hurt it. I raised it, drew a nice careful bead on the nail head and swung.

But something went wrong. Some power other than the muscles of my arm hurled the hammer at the wall with tremendous speed. I had one kaleidoscopic view of the hammer head speeding past my eyes so fast that it registered as gray blur. There seemed to be mighty forces swirling around me.

Then the hammer hit the wall.

Instantly a tremendous blasting roar shook the foundation of the building and I felt the floor tremble under my feet.

The effect of the explosion was devastating. The entire side of the building seemed to be blasted outward from the force of the detonation.

I felt myself lifted bodily from the

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ground and hurled backward like a straw in a gale. Even while I was flying through the air I managed somehow to keep my eyes open, keep from losing consciousness. Through the heavy fog of brick dust and particles of stone I saw in one panoramic glance that a huge ragged hole had been torn through the heavy wall. In that one hectic instant of awareness I could see the army tents through the terrible demolition of the side of the lab.

Then I struck the opposite wall with a bone-wrenching thud and fell to the floor. Plaster cascaded down on me in a thick white stream and delicate apparatus suspended from the walls and ceiling crashed about me with a jangling roar.

A few moment after the crescendo of noise I could hear the thin wail of sirens growing to a full-throated scream. Voices from the hallway joined in the babel of sound. I tried to struggle to a sitting position, but something like a knife blade twisted in my shoulder and I must have passed out.

THE next thing I remember strong arms were dragging me out of the debris of the demolished laboratory. Then I was deposited on a canvas stretcher and carried from the building. As I was being lugged down the steps I saw something that made me forget the pain in my shoulder. Maybe I was delirious, but I don't think so.

Out of the white sky I saw two jagged forks of brilliant lightning drive into the wrecked laboratory like two mighty golden swords. I struggled frantically to a sitting position, but one of the stretcher orderlies grabbed me and shoved me back.

Everything swam for an instant and the next thing I was aware of was being slid into a police ambulance. Before the doors slammed I saw one other thing that jarred me back into consciousness.

A huge black car had rolled to the curb and stopped. From the tonneau jumped three heavily-whiskered, black-coated men. One of them showed an official card to a guard and then all three of them raced past the police lines and into the building which housed the demolished lab.

I did a blackout then—

WHEN I came to, I looked around and found myself in surroundings which were not exactly unfamiliar to me. I was in jail. I was lying on a narrow cot and above me I could see that the rays of the sun were sliced by a barred window. Turning my head I saw a door of barred steel. I sighed fatalistically. Moving my shoulder experimentally I discovered that the ache was gone, and that outside of a foggy sensation of bewilderment I felt as good as new.

As my memory went back to work, a torrent of annoying questions flooded my brain. I sat up on the side of the bed and fumbled for a cigarette, but I couldn't find any in my pockets. The most nagging question of all was what had caused the explosion in the lab? I remembered the peculiar sensation of losing control over the gavel as I swung it. As if some all-powerful hand had grabbed it from me just at that instant. It had seemed as if the blow of the gavel had been responsible for the destruction of the wall, but of course that was silly. What had probably occurred was that just as I swung the gavel the explosion happened, and I had imagined that one was a result of the other.

That, of course, was stupid. How could a five- or six-pound hammer knock a wall down? Another thing occurred to me then. Had I been suffering delusions when I saw those two huge bolts of orange lightning blasting about

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the lab? I stretched back on the cot and tried to stop thinking about the incident. It was a scrambled, distorted nightmare from the start to finish and I wanted no more of it.

With this fine resolution I closed my eyes and tried to doze. But before I could even start counting chorus girls another question popped into my head. A question that jerked me upright on the cot, and started icy beads of sweat all over my body.

What was I doing in jail?

I was no criminal! I hadn't committed any crimes!

I climbed angrily to my feet and shouted lustily for the guard. Who did they think they were pushing around? More things were popping into my head now. I had a story to do on the Ussarian good-will gavel and it was a cinch I'd never get it stewing in the local bastille.

A guard, heavy set and belligerent, appeared at the door.

"Whaddaya want?" he growled.

"I want to get out of this fire trap." I yelled.

"Calm down," he sneered. "You'll be using more birthday candles when they do let you out."

"What do you mean?" I said uneasily.

"You're in for sabotage," he snapped. "For trying to rub out that new training station next to the college. You'll get a trial and I hope you get it—right in the neck!"

I SAGGED down on the bed. What a sweet mess I'd stumbled into. Locked away as a saboteur, probably slated for a nice comfortable bunk at Alcatraz. I experienced a growing sense of outrage and indignation, but before I could do anything concrete about it two more guards appeared, dragging between them the excited, trembling figure of Professor Stiles.

They unlocked the door of my cell and shoved him in, then slammed and locked the door again.

"You stupid fools!" he shouted. He was trembling with anger and humiliation, and his blue eyes were gleaming frostily. "Can't you see I'm telling the truth? If I am not released immediately drastic, terrible things may happen to important members of our government."

One guard shrugged and tapped his forehead meaningly. Then they both moved off shaking their heads.

The Professor turned and saw me for the first time.

"Who are you?" he demanded. Then recognition dawned in his eyes. "Y—you're the man I've been looking for. You're the man who came into my laboratory just before the explosion."

"That's right," I nodded.

There was suddenly a pleading, desperate look in the old Professor's eyes. He grabbed both my lapels with thin, veined hands in an imploring gesture.

"Where is the hammer?" he gasped. "You've got to tell me. You must know."

I took him by the arms and shoved him gently down on the cot.

"Take it easy," I said. "I don't know where the hammer is for sure, but my guess is that the Ussarian legation has it safe in their legation now. What makes you so worried about that?"

"Listen to me, boy," the Professor said weakly. He drew a deep shuddering breath before he went on. "That hammer is as dangerous, more dangerous in fact, than a thousand pounds of dynamite. Its destructive potentialities are practically unlimited. It is made double dangerous and vicious by the fact that its destructive power can be brought about by accident, as it did

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when you used it."

"Now, take it easy," I said unbelievingly. "You'll have me believing that I actually did knock that wall out with a blow of the hammer."

"My boy," the Professor said with desperation in his voice, "that's exactly what did happen. After the accident I searched the laboratory thoroughly but I could not find a trace of the hammer. Now you say the Ussarian legation has it. Why should they have it? Why do they want it? How did they get it from the laboratory?"

His last question jogged my memory to something I had forgotten. As I was being tossed into the ambulance I had seen three be-whiskered figures—obviously from the Ussarian legation—pile out of an embassy car and dash into the demolished lab. That explained the mystery of the disappearing gavel. That is if you could call it a mystery. The hirsute gentlemen from the Ussarian embassy certainly had a right to the gavel, inasmuch as they shipped it over three continents to get it here in time for the presentation.

I LOOKED closely at the Professor. I was beginning to feel that he was out of place in a jail. He belonged in a mental ward.

He was looking at me beseechingly, desperately.

"Why," he repeated again, "does the Ussarian legation want that hammer? You must tell me."

"Okay," I said patiently, "I'll talk. The Ussarian government, as a gesture of friendliness and good will, is presenting that gavel to the United States Senate tonight. It will be used to bring the Senate to order, then to discuss the passage of the new war-aid bill."

The Professor clapped both hands to his head in despair and from his lips issued a dismayed moan.

"My boy," he cried frantically, "I see the whole diabolic picture now. It is a devilishly clever, horribly simple scheme. We must stop them. We must!"

"Stop them from doing what?" I asked dubiously.

Professor Stiles wiped his forehead with a trembling hand and seemed to be making an effort to steady himself.

"Listen to me, my boy," he said slowly, "and do not stop me until I am through. What I am about to tell you will sound as utterly weird and fantastic as anything you have heard in your life, but believe me it is the absolute living truth."

In spite of myself I was impressed. There was an unmistakable ring of sincerity to the old duck's voice, and an unmistakable gleam of truth and terrible earnestness in his intelligent eyes.

"Okay," I said, "shoot."

He drew another deep breath before he started to speak.

"I was expecting a shipment of instruments today," he said quietly, "and I met the plane to save any loss of time. You probably know that there was a mix-up at the port and that I received the wrong package. I, however, was not aware of it until I reached the lab. When I discovered the mistake I started to call the airport, but then something about the unusual hammer arrested my attention. I have made a deep and thorough study of anthropology and archeology and I was immediately impressed with the almost incredible age of the hammer.

"Curious, I examined it carefully and discovered that the handle was actually a hollow compartment which served as a repository for several sheets of ancient yellowed parchment. I took them out and was able to read a word here and there although the language they were written in belongs to a race of people

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who flourished thousands of years before the dawn of Egyptian civilization."

I hunched forward on the edge of the bunk. The Professor's excitement-charged voice was contagious. My hands were clenched into fists.

"The few words I was able to decipher," Professor Stiles continued deliberately, "convinced me that I had accidentally stumbled on something men have dreamed of so long and so fruitlessly that it has come to be regarded as a childish myth. I checked my findings from every angle and there was not the slightest room for mistake or error in my translation. All indications pointed unswervingly to the same astounding conclusion."

Professor Stiles' piercing eyes were searching mine with a steady, intent gaze as he finished speaking. I swallowed with difficulty.

"And what conclusion was that?" I asked weakly.

"That the good-will gavel which the Ussarian government is to present to the United States Senate tonight," Professor Stiles said softly, "is actually the invincible Hammer of Thor, mighty thunder God of Teutonic mythology!"

I DIDN'T know whether to laugh or not.

The Professor must have seen the amusement in my face for he jumped to his feet excitedly.

"You're skeptical, of course," he said quickly, "but listen to me a minute. You yourself experienced the terrible destructive power of that hammer a few hours ago. You saw what fury is dormant in it. The Ussarian government will stop at nothing to prevent or delay the passage of the present war-aid bill. They won't even stop at the wholesale execution of the legislative body which will pass that bill.

"Think! It is impossible to carry any package into the Senatorial chambers these days. What more perfect way to accomplish their end than to place a deadly instrument of destruction into the hands of the Vice-President himself."

Professor Stiles gripped my shoulders with both his bony hands and his eyes met mine with a simple, eloquent plea.

"Believe me, boy," he said earnestly, "I know what I am talking about. If we disregard our duty, a wholesale tragedy will take place tonight that will haunt our sleep for the rest of our lives."

I didn't know what to say. I felt that Professor Stiles was speaking the truth. There was no doubting the desperate earnestness in his eyes, in his grip on my shoulder. Imbued with some of the excitement that gripped him, I rose to my feet and grabbed his hand.

"I'm with you," I said. "But how the devil are we going to stop them from blowing Hades out of the Senate. We're in durance vile for the duration, if you ask me."

The Professor bit his lips and sank wearily on to the cot. "I told the police of the danger," he said bitterly, "but they ridiculed me. They regard my story as a fanciful dream. They're holding me now pending an investigation into the explosion at the college today. Don't the fools realize that by that time it will be too late."

"What time is it?" I asked suddenly.

"It's late afternoon," he muttered, after a glance at his watch. "If we are going to do anything it will have to be done in the next few hours. After that it will be too late."

"We've got to get out of here," I said worriedly.

I LOOKED desperately out of the barred window and I noticed that it had started to rain. Not a mild sum-

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mer shower, but a drenching torrent that hissed past the window with the whisper of a ten foot whip. It was an electrical storm. Great vivid bolts of lightning ripped bright gashes in the overcast skies and the menacing rumble of thunder had become a constant reverberating crescendo of crashing noise.

Why the rumble of thunder should have reminded me of my city editor I don't know, but it did. I turned to Professor Stiles and patted him on the shoulder.

"We've got one chance," I said. "I haven't talked to my boss yet. Maybe he can spring us. If he thinks there's a story in it, he'll make the try anyway."

The Professor looked up with a gleam of hope in his eyes.

"We've *got* to get out of here, remember that," he said huskily. "The lives of hundreds of people depend on it. More important than that is the fact that the successful foreign policy of the United States may depend on our efforts tonight."

It was a heavy weight to have on your shoulders and no fooling about that. I took a deep breath and crossed my fingers.

Then I yelled for the guards. When they arrived I asked them to take me to the Chief. At first they grumbled but the fact that I was a newsboy made a difference. Finally they led me out of the cell and down a long corridor and through a few more rooms and eventually into the august presence of Chief Brannigan, himself.

Brannigan was a big red-faced mick whose folks came from the same part of Ireland as mine did. I had used this as talking point before, but I was afraid I had worn it pretty thin.

"Brannigan," I said, "as one Kerryman to another I'm askin' you to let me use the phone for just one call."

"As one Kerryman to another," Brannigan snapped back, "I'm saying no. Do you understand? No!"

He finally relented though after a few more precious minutes of argument and I grabbed the phone and dialed the Chief.

After a few more interminable seconds his voice rasped over the wire.

"City desk. Carson, speaking."

"This is Delaney," I said.

Then I held the phone away from my ear for the next two minutes until the sizzling tirade of profanity and invective died away.

"Wait a minute," I said, when I had a chance. "I've got the biggest story of the year right in my mitt. You've got to spring me, Chief, you just gotta."

"Spring you?" he laughed nastily. "Why should I? I've been reading about your exploits of this morning in every paper but mine. If you have to turn fifth-columnist you might give your own paper the first beat on the story."

"Now look, Chief," I yelled desperately, "you know I'm no fifth columnist. The real story on that explosion hasn't broken yet. And it won't break until you get me out of this louse cage and let me get to work on it."

I took a desperate chance then and hung up. I knew that the only way to get Carson to get into action was to convince him I had something really hot. I did have, but nothing I could tell him about on the phone. If I had started raving about the hammer of Thor, he would have been the first to start the collection for the straight jacket.

I WENT back to my cell then and started pacing. The sweat was standing out on me like bullets as the minutes ticked and it began to grow dark. With the darkness the storm seemed to increase its fury. Bolt after bolt of hot orange lightning streaked through the sky and the roar of the thunder sounded

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like an angry volcano. I looked from my watch to the taut silent figure of the Professor and back to my watch again.

At eight o'clock he shook his head in a beaten, despairing gesture.

"It's too late now," he whispered wearily. "We've tried, but we've failed."

I was about to agree with him when I heard the brisk steps of the guards moving down the hall. I held my breath in an agony of uncertainty until they stopped in front of my cell.

"Delaney?" one of them snapped the question.

"That's me," I gulped.

"You've been granted bail," he said, "and it's been paid by the Standard. You are now at liberty."

Before he had gotten half way through the sentence I was crawling into my coat.

"Don't worry, Professor," I yelled jubilantly. "I'll take care of things."

He gripped my arm fervently.

"God bless you, my boy," he said hoarsely. "Remember how much is depending on you."

I didn't wait for any more farewells. I dashed out of the cell and down the corridor. Twenty seconds later I was standing in the bucket-like rain signaling frantically for a cab. The fury of the summer storm was absolutely awe-inspiring. Thunder and lightning and wind and rain all joined together to form a symphony of spectacular, angry noise and color.

By the time I got a cab I was drenched to the skin.

"Capitol," I snapped to the driver. "There's five bucks in it for you if you forget the speed laws."

He grinned back at me and winked. Then the car shot forward as if it had been ejected from a catapult. At a dizzying pace we shot through the maze of circular streets that have been laid out to confuse the weary traveler, and finally we roared down Constitution Avenue with the brilliantly lighted dome of the Capitol as a beacon light to guide us.

The storm was growing in intensity. Long flashing swords of lightning were stabbing at the dome of the capital, itself. We slithered to a stop in front of the Senate and I crawled out, paid the driver and dashed inside.

I got past the coppers with my press cards, but when I got to the doors that led to the floor of the Senate I was stumped. They were marked NO ADMITTANCE and they meant just that. The guard saw me coming and held up his hand.

I realized that the time had come for drastic action. With the fate of the U. S. Senate hanging on my action I couldn't afford to be squeamish. I thought of the hammer of Thor descending on the chairman's table, and the realization of what would happen gave me all the incentive I needed. I smiled at the guard. A pleasant, kindly, deceptive smile. Then I swung my fist up from my hip and batted him into land of kingdom come with the sweetest right hook I've thrown in all my life.

He fell to the floor and I heard a yell behind me, but then I was through the swinging doors, and into the Senatorial chambers.

MY entrance caused something in the nature of a turmoil. Senators craned their necks to get a look at the sudden disturbance, but my eyes were glued to the tall, scholarly figure of the Vice-President of the United States. He was standing behind his table and it was obvious that he had just finished a speech of acceptance to the Ussarian representative who was backing away before him. His arm was raised in the air, and with a chill of horror, I recog-

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nized the gavel he held in his hand as the one presented to him by the Ussarian* legation.

The gavel that was actually the thunderous hammer of Thor!

"Stop" I yelled. "Don't use that gavel. It's dangerous!"

Almost instantly bedlam reigned. In the noise and confusion I forced myself to the front of the Senate.

"Please listen to me," I yelled over the noise. "The gavel which has just been presented to the Vice-President is dangerous and unfit to use. If it *is* used it might cause the death of every person in this room."

"This is an outrage," the Ussarian ambassador cried haughtily. "It is an insult, a reflection on the good wishes and integrity of the mighty nation which it is my privilege to represent."

"It's not a reflection *on* the nation," I shouted, "but a reflection *of* the nation. It's a reflection of its duplicity, its hypocrisy and its complete lack of honor and decency."

I was blowing my top, but I didn't care. These things were in my system and it was a pleasure to get them out.

There was a clamorous roar in the Senate hall now, but over it the voice of the Ussarian ambassador carried.

"If there is any doubt," he cried impressively, "let us inspect the gavel. Let us pass it around to various Senators and let them decide if it is dangerous."

There was a murmur of assent at this, and the Ussarian ambassador stepped forward to receive the good-will gavel from the hands of the Vice-President.

It was a bad moment for me. I knew that the gavel *looked* perfectly harmless and I knew that no one could suspect from its appearance that it was a potential agent of destruction. Then, too, I was beginning to think rationally again.

I was wondering if maybe this business about Thor's thunder hammer was just a wild dream concocted by a deranged Professor. I would certainly be in an unenviable spot if that were the case.

Above the excited comment and hubbub I could hear the storm raging outside the building. It was almost as if all its fury had concentrated itself above the roof of the Senate chambers. Peal after peal of thunder cracked in the sky and the entire heavens above the capitol were glaringly illumined by the furious play of the lightning.

The Ussarian ambassador, smiling confidently, was taking the gavel now from the hands of the Vice-President.

"We will examine it carefully," he was saying, "then we will deal with this madman who accuses the great nation of Ussar of—"

He was holding the hammer lightly in his hands as he spoke, but he never completed the sentence. For at that exact instant an amazing thing happened. From the ceiling of the Senatorial chambers a magnificent, brilliant flashing ball of fire appeared. It hung suspended for an instant and then it lengthened into a sword-like bolt of lightning and flashed downward toward the horror-stricken figure of the Ussarian ambassador. He screamed once, a mad tortured scream that was torn from the bottom of his soul. Then he

* Obviously the Ussarian delegate who presented the hammer of Thor, anticipating the usual procedure of the Senate, did not expect the Vice-President to use the hammer before he was forced to make his departure. This was to have been a special, closed session of the Senate, and no foreigners would have been allowed at the actual proceedings. Thus, it is probable that his intention in backing away was to get out of range of the full devastation of the hammer when it should fall.

It is well known that in the dictator countires, the life of the individual is placed secondary to the country, and it is also possible that, although using as much caution as possible, the delegate was willing to face certain death to attain consummation of the plot against the Senate.—Ed.

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crashed to the floor.

THE Senate was a mad house. I was one of the first to reach the side of the stricken ambassador. A glance and I knew he was dead. His entire face and one side of his body were charred black. Somehow I had expected that and I was not particularly concerned. What I wanted to see was the hammer of Thor. The ambassador had been holding it in his hand when he was struck and it shouldn't be far from him.

I looked around carefully for a few seconds, but I could see no sign of it. Police were swarming into the chambers and my brief hour of liberty was over once again. Things happened so fast then that I'm not sure of all of it.

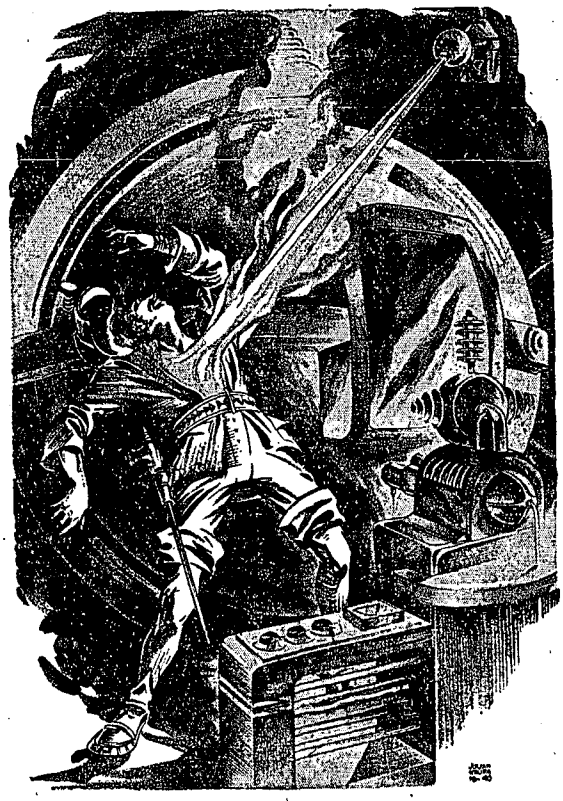
I was thrown into the jug and the paper got me out along with the Professor.

I wrote the story and got a raise.

Some of the Senators are convinced to this day that there was nothing wrong with the good-will gavel. Others are not sure. But anyway if it was the hammer of Thor the mighty thunder-god must have reclaimed his own for it has never been seen to this day.

Just one more thing. To those who are skeptical about the whole affair I can only offer this one very peculiar fact. The weather bureau records show that during the day the hammer of Thor was in Washington there was more electrical activity and thunder than ever before recorded. Here's the funny thing. In spite of this unprecedented activity the only other building actually hit was the Ussarian legation and the only casualties reported were the three Ussarian representatives who were killed in the same blast.

You can't fool with that guy, Thor, huh? Nor with his hammer!



MYSTERY
OF THE
MARTIAN PENDULUM

by
Thornton Ayre & A. R. Steber

Remember "Locked City"? Certainly you do! How could you forget it! Well, here's the story you've been waiting for . . . a tale that will snatch the laurel away from that first Ayre classic. And this time—another favorite author of yours has added his talent to produce a mystery masterpiece! By all the Gods of Mars, don't miss this story in the big

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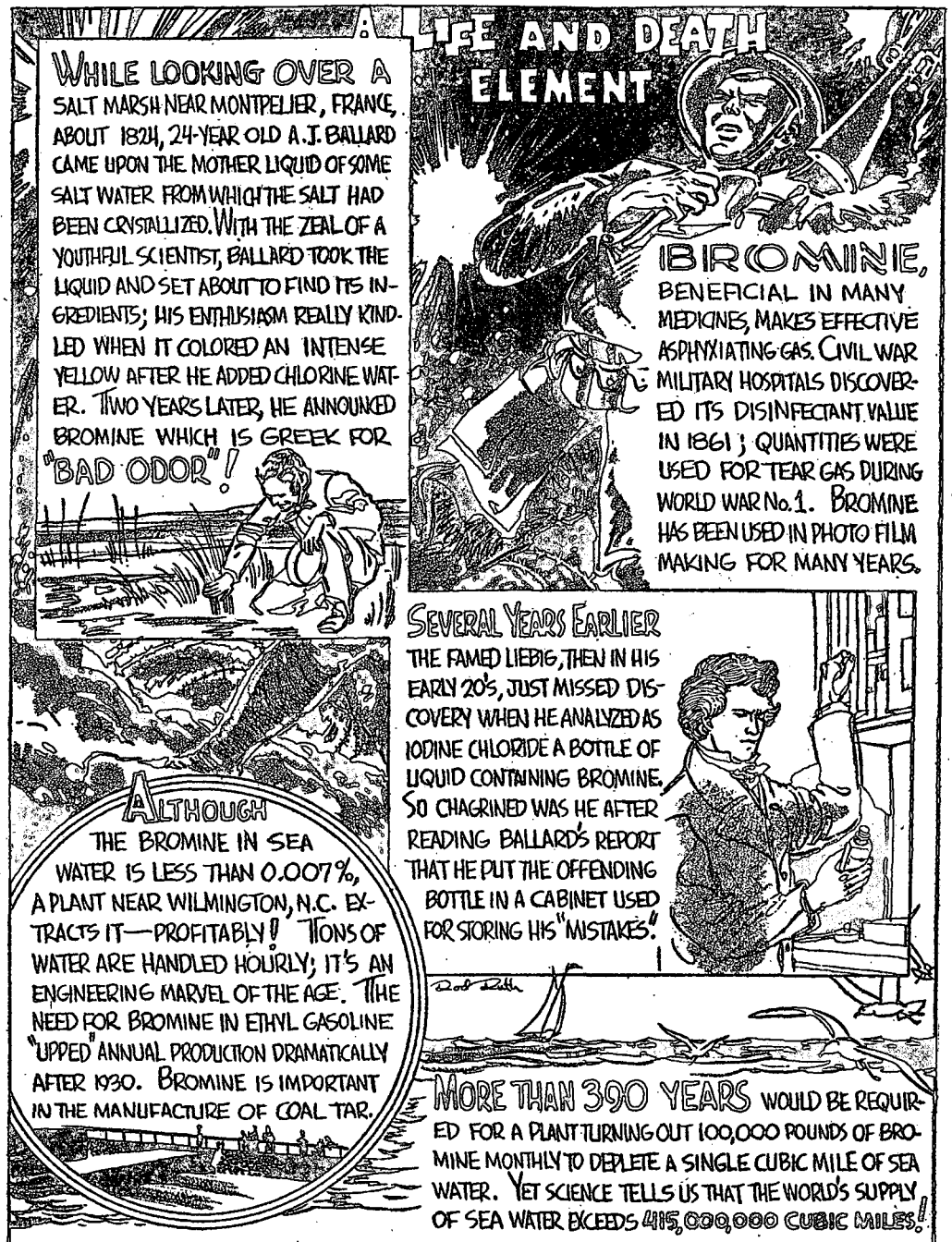
Romance of the Elements---Bromine



BROMINE is number 35 in the International Table of Atomic Weights. Its symbol is Br and its atomic weight is 79.916. It is a dark red liquid which boils at 59°. Its specific gravity is about 3.18. The vapor is dark red and has a disagreeable stench. It is used as a mild oxidizing agent in making certain drugs and dyes. It is used in medicine, and as a bleaching agent. It is found in sea water as a salt in solution.

NEXT MONTH—The Romance of Fluorine

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Queen of the Living Puppets

by DON WILCOX

Janetto had a strange power; he could see the future. But Venzita, his girl musician really held the strings to his human puppets

ENOUGH was enough! The hooting and yelling had worn Dr. Janetto's sensitive nerves to snapping threads. And now, on the tenth night of the carnival's stay at this ancient metropolis, the riff-raff had begun throwing rocks.

"Get the manager!" Janetto shouted through the rear window of his house-trailer. "Tell him I'm through!"

"This ain't nothing!" the passing carnival hand retorted, moping off.

"Tell him I want my money. I'm through feeding pearls to swine!"

With that, Dr. Albert Janetto whirled about in his wheel-chair to the curtained entrance in the house-trailer's sidewalls. He hadn't had a customer all evening. The masses of beggars and scalawags who couldn't afford the price of a sideshow took their fun out in mocking hoots and laughter. A sorry state for the high arts of mysticism to fall into.

But such was the New Dark Ages! No appreciation of the finer things of

Hobart saw those dangling puppets and recognized them—all but the last. Was it—himself?

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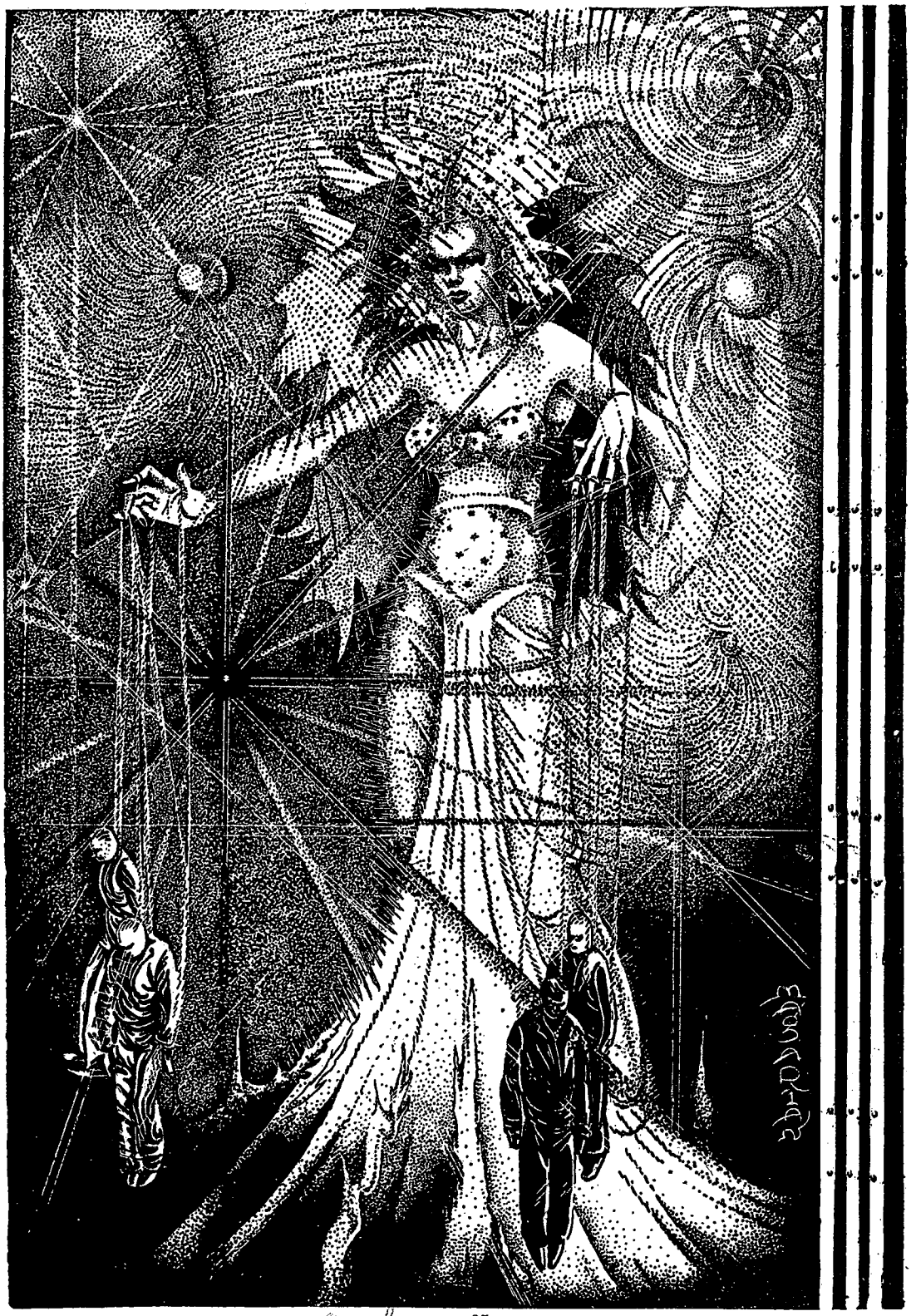

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life. Those crowds of beggars fairly gloated in their poverty and ignorance!

Janetto reached out through the open door, defying taunts and flying clods, and jerked in the battered tin sign, "PALACE OF VISIONS." He flung aside the curtains and slammed the house-trailer door closed with a jolt that knocked several boxes of incense off their shelves. He dragged out his suitcases and began packing . . .

At midnight he found a cheap hotel on the edge of the central business district. While he waited for the night clerk to make up the room, he wheeled along the lobby walls.

His thick eyelids fell to a thoughtful halfmast. He scarcely noticed the series of wall maps tracing the changes in the national boundaries brought about by World War II and the twenty years that followed. He was unconscious of the falling of chips of dirty mortar from the drafty patchwork of masonry in one corner of the room. Each time a heavy truck went by, the building shuddered, echoing the war days when shells had crashed through those walls.

Physically and mentally, Dr. Albert Janetto had been shattered no less than a war-torn building. For twenty years he had drifted about in this squeaky wheel-chair, groping vainly for snatches of pre-war security. In those days his mystic arts had promised a lucrative career. But now . . .

He reread the pencil-scrawled note the carnival manager had sent him with his check: "Here's your pay, Doc. You were a good sideshow while you lasted, but you haven't got enough carnival in your blood. You'll never get anywhere blowing up at a crowd. You've got to master them. That was never truer than now. These New Dark Ages are hardboiled, and the riff-raff piles up thicker on us at every new town. Good luck, Doc, and take my advice and climb down off your high-horse."

Below the manager's signature he had added a P.S. This was what Janetto reread several times.

"P.S. By the way, Doc, I never did know whether your racket was on the level. Some of your customers claimed it was. If so, why the hell don't you whip up a vision or two for yourself and see where you're going?"

The night clerk wheeled Janetto onto the elevator. A moment later he was alone in his room.

HE propelled himself across to the window, rose up on his crutches and locked it, then drew the shade to shut out most of the flickering night lights. Where the shade was torn he pinned a newspaper over it.

The big mirror leaning above the old-fashioned dresser distracted him, sending back the hard glitter of his coal-black eyes, the determined twist of his mouth, the sallow green of his close-shaved sensitive chin. He turned to one of the suitcases on the bed, opened it, drew out a wide purple velvet scarf. This he threw over the top of the mirror, allowing its glossy folds to droop down over the edges of the dresser.

From another case he took an assortment of short candles and some boxes of incense powders. He arranged the candles on a long aluminum tray, which he placed on the velvet-covered dresser, and lighted them.

Over the eleven sturdy blazes he fixed eleven dainty cup-like cylinders, and in each of these he poured a liberal sprinkling of powders. He snapped off the electric light to test the results. The eleven yellow blazes could no longer be seen. Instead, eleven small columns of red smoke rose, illuminated before the background of purple velvet. The room was all blackness except for those eleven slow-moving shafts of red smoke.

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Janetto drew a deep breath. The incense was strong in the air.

The twisting coils of smoke, so familiar to him from his years of mystic practice, engaged his eyes with some of the long lost freshness that had accompanied his earliest experiments. The charm was still there.

Without turning his head, he reached in the suitcase, passed his hand along the row of bottles, chose the one that contained the strongest elixir of visions. He uncorked it, drank deeply, tossed the empty bottle aside.

He took another long breath of the perfumed air, settled more comfortably in his wheel-chair, let his thick eyelids droop into dreamy relaxation. He waited.

Ten minutes passed. The elixir began to work. He felt the sluggish torpor engulf his sensitive nerves, felt the imagery of his relaxed eyes suddenly grow sharper. The weaving threads of smoke glowed out of the darkness in fuller contours. The fantastic shapes became a parade of figures, a passing show that formed and melted before his imaginative eyes.

He mumbled to himself. "Racket . . . on the level! Little did that manager realize! . . . Hell, the world's masters of science could come to me for clearer insights . . . if they weren't so damned conceited . . . My arts could open paths for magistrates and kings and presidents . . . For anyone that gets blinded by chaos . . . Even myself . . ."

His voice lowered to a whisper.

"What is *my* answer? . . . *How* can I sell my visions to the world? . . . *How* can I turn this knowledge into wealth and power? . . . *How?* . . . *How?* . . ."

MINUTES passed. Janetto's concentration grew more intense.

Suddenly the answer began to form. The red smoke thickened into meaningful shapes. A momentary pause in the swirl shot its suggestion home. The picture hung like a tableau somewhere between the background of purple velvet and dimmer eye of Janetto's brain. He drew in a sharp breath, closed his drooping eyelids, fixed the image in his mind.

He looked again. It was still there, not motionless but changing. Minor figures were coming and going past the granite pedestal on which the central figure stood.

The central figure was a beautiful young girl, dressed in a flowing purple gown. She was smiling, and there was the slightest touch of disdain in the curve of her lips and the arch of her eyebrows as she looked down on the passing figures.

In her hands she held an ancient Grecian lyre, which she stroked carelessly with her long slim fingers—and now Janetto imagined he could hear the faint tinkle of those weird strings.

At first the girl's beauty so fascinated him that he did not see what the minor figures had to do with the picture. But at once he was startled to notice his own hand—it had to be his own, for it wore the same topaz ring, bore the same vein markings; the hand passed across the side of the pedestal to gather up the bags of money that the passing figures placed there at the feet of the girl.

Then, as the vision began to fade, Janetto caught the last detail. The procession of persons, mostly men who were so magnetized by the girl's beauty that they laid offerings of gold at her feet, passed on through an entrance over which hung an old battered tin sign hung with diamond-studded nails . . .

For a time the vision screen was almost black. Janetto began to whisper to himself, "Where do I find her? . . .

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Where do I find her? . . . She is undoubtedly the most beautiful girl in the land . . . But where? . . ."

The red strands of smoke began to weave a landscape of rolling hills, distant mountains . . .

CHAPTER II

A Reunion

IT was a sunny morning in the narrow mountain-flanked grasslands known as the Blue Valley. It was a morning for making hay, and Rustan's strong young arms wielded the pitchfork with practiced skill. The horses kept the old hay wagon lumbering along just fast enough for Rustan to keep up a sweat.

He finished a windrow, was about to start on the next one, when he looked across the fence to see a hiker coming along the highway.

Rustan turned the horses to rest facing the breeze. He ambled over to the fence, stripped off a sliver of wood to chew on while he waited for the figure to approach. Rustan never missed a chance to talk with a drifter. He was, in fact, a drifter himself by birth, though the charm of Blue Valley had rooted him down for the time being.

"It's a girl!" he said to himself. Then as she came closer, he called, "Hi, there! where's your limousine?"

"Left it back in the ditch," said the girl.

"Chauffeur?"

"Same ditch," the girl retorted without smiling. "Where can I get water?"

She looked warm in her knitted green jersey and faded moleskin trousers rolled up at the ankles. Her fluffy red hair was damp at the edges of her forehead. Her lips were slightly swollen.

"Right this way, madam," said Rustan, "I've got a jug in the wagon. Say . . ."

He looked sharply at her clear dark eyes, the dainty curves of her face. There was something damned familiar—

She crossed the barbed-wire fence with a rugged grace that proved she was a veteran drifter. She caught up the burlap-covered water jug with a hooked finger and rested its weight on her folded arm as she drank.

Her face suddenly drew back from the lips of the jug. "I know you!" she cried. "You're Rustan!"

His eyes brightened. "Are you—Mary? The kid I used to play with down in the west-side jungles? I'll be damned!"

He gave a yell of delight, tossed the water jug to the wagon, grabbed her and kissed her. She laughed and tousled his hair and beat him on the shoulders with her fists the way she had used to do when they were kids. Then she drew back with mock dignity.

"Here, here! You're taking advantage, kissing a girl before she has time to get her guard up. I ought to punch you."

"Hell, I was so glad to see you!" Rustan paused, looking at her intently. How she had changed in five years! She must be all of sixteen! Rustan twinkled. "If I'd really meant it for a serious kiss, I'd have kissed you *this* way—"

She pushed him away with a toss of her arm and laughed, "No you don't. I'm a lady now, even if I don't dress like it. I'm entitled to men's respect, and believe me, laddie, I'm getting it."

"In the drifters' jungles?"

"Your darn right." Mary looked at him steadily. "You know how it is. There's plenty of us been uprooted in the last few years, and set a-drifting with no homes or families; but some of the oneriest beggars in the jungles still have enough decency to put up a scrap

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when a girl needs a friend."

"Hmm. What made you leave the jungles?"

The girl arched an eyebrow. "Too much scrapping." She took another drink of water. "Beside, you know what I've always said. When I grew up I'd get a job . . . I hear that times are getting better in some of the cities the other side of the mountains."

"You won't like a job."

"I might."

"Stay here and take a job on this hay wagon," Rustan suggested.

"Give me a pitchfork."

SHE took the extra fork and went to work. They finished loading the hay wagon, sat in the shade of it and ate lunch, and talked over the world's problems.

A third voice interrupted their discussion—the growl of the sour-faced old hired man.

"What's *she* doing here?"

"Working here," Rustan grinned. "She's a friend of mine."

"You and your friends are getting too thick around here." Sour-face lighted a pipe and sat down beside them. He scowled at the girl. "The government'll have to do something about all these drifters."

"The government better do something about the government," Rustan retorted. "What *is* the government anyhow? A bunch of police in each city, run by a bunch of magistrates, to keep a bunch of barons in the dough. The *big* governments have gone out like soap bubbles."

"Maybe so," said Sour-face. "But up here in Blue Valley we don't care how many governments go out or come in, so long as they don't pan their troubles off on us."

Rustan was satisfied to let this point stand. Nowhere in all his hitchhiking travels had he found a more serene or self-sufficient place than this bit of valley. He liked it here.

Sour-face rose. "You'd better send that girl away before the boss and his wife get back this afternoon."

"I'm going to make them give her a job," said Rustan. "They'll do it, too."

"I'm warning you!"

"Go plow your potatoes before I jab you with a pitchfork!" Rustan emphasized his words by reaching for a fork, and old Sour-face hobbled away.

Rustan turned to Mary. "I'm in dead earnest about that job. The boss and his wife'll fall for you. You'd like it here—I hope."

The girl's eyes snapped at him like firecrackers. "So you've settled down! I'm surprised, after the way you used to talk. You had so much drifter in your blood you were getting out and set the world on fire."

Rustan plowed an uneasy hand through his shaggy brown hair. "We had a lot of big ideas, didn't we? But it looks like the New Dark Ages have got a choke-hold on us. We won't live to see the century that the world shakes out of it. So here I am making hay in Blue Valley. How about staying with me, kid?"

"Maybe . . . I had my heart set on crashing some city across the mountains for a job. But if I could save up a little cash first, to get some clothes—"

"It's safe and peaceful up here," Rustan mused. "In these times you never know what's going to happen in the cities."

"If you think your boss and his wife would like me well enough to hire me for a few weeks—"

"I'm sure of it, Mary!"

TWO weeks later Mary rode away in a station wagon driven by a uniformed chauffeur and occupied by an

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elderly crippled man with a crisp authoritative voice and masterful manners.

The station wagon had come up into the driveway without warning, Rustan learned from the sour-faced hired man. There had been a few minutes' talk about a mysterious job and the girl had agreed to leave at once.

"She said she would stop and tell you goodbye if she saw you in the field," Sour-face told the staggered young man. "And if she didn't see you I was to give you all her love and kisses."

So that was that.

Rustan went back to work, but his heart wasn't in it.

And for the next three years he had no heart for work of any kind. He drifted back and forth across the continent, scouring every city for some wisp of information about a lost girl named Mary. His search was fruitless.

He tried repeatedly to get work, but there was no work.

At length he joined that growing group of cynical and vicious drifters called the Rag Birds, who made it their pet sport to climb the trees in the parks to mock at the respectable people who passed beneath.

And like the other Rag Birds, he accustomed his eyes to the ugliness of ragged clothes and unshaven faces and dirt and hunger, and sharpened his ears to the hollow ring of every noble sentiment uttered by a well-fed magistrate.

CHAPTER III

Mozambique Has a Vision

MAGISTRATE MOZAMBIQUE was off on his summer vacation. He was having a high old time. Or, as he would later tell his fellow magistrates, he was getting the pleasurable restoration that his over-wrought nervous constitution so badly needed.

Magistrate Mozambique had a nose like a baked apple and ears like pancakes—but, as every important citizen and thousands of non-important Rag Birds in one of the continent's oldest cities were well aware, the magistrate had a very tender eye for beauty.

When Mozambique first laid eyes on the beautiful Venzita, strumming her silver-plated guitar with the languid air of an artist lost to all save her music, a visible shudder rocked his overstuffed frame. He elbowed his way through the crowd.

He paused, touched by a conflict of random emotions—a jubilation at his discovery, a certain sadness that such a beautiful creature should be exposed to the gaze of so many onlookers obviously inferior to himself, an unfathomable yearning to know who this creature was and where she came from, and a slightly pained awareness that her guitar was out of tune.

"Venzita!" He murmured the name over to himself, smiling stageward as his lips moved. The girl's eyes momentarily swept across him. He caught his breath.

Then the song was over, the girl disappeared in the wings, and a little old man in a wheel-chair moved out on the stage. After a moment, Mozambique managed to turn his eyes upon this newcomer, though it was like focusing upon a dark object immediately after a dazzling light has flashed across one's eyes.

The man in the wheel-chair had a sharp, cunning face, heavy eyelids, a sharp little beard that grew—or stuck on—at an impertinent angle.

Magistrate Mozambique listened to the little old man's crisp words . . . What's this . . . Your p r o b l e m s solved by visions? . . . Rats . . . Mozambique had no problems. He was

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on his vacation.

What's that? . . . The beautiful Venzita entertains with her melodious music while you await the preparation of the vision stage? Ah, that's different! . . . After all, there were many disturbing problems in the back of any magistrate's mind . . . There were bound to be . . . A vision would be the very thing . . . Twenty-five dollars? A mere nothing. Solve some of the city's problems—let the city pay the bill! A perfect set-up . . .

Late that night, after Mozambique returned to his hotel, he jotted a few items in his official expense book. The vision *had* been a worth-while investment, he was sure, for at the time it had clarified for him some courses of action that had kept him and the other magistrates deadlocked for several weeks—indeed, had forced him to take a vacation.

Just what solutions the visions gave him for those deadlocks he did not bother to record. They had become a bit fuzzy in his mind. The real business of the evening had been the dinner to which he had treated Venzita and—er—what was his name?—oh, yes, the eminent Dr. Albert Janetto.

The dinner a success? Mozambique should hope to say it was! He had secured from the doctor a solemn promise. The doctor and his charming protege would come to Mozambique's city and appear before the magistrates assembled. The doctor had accepted an advance from the city's funds to clinch the deal . . .

TWELVE days later Magistrate Mozambique took extreme pleasure in making an introduction and proposing a toast.

"To our guests of the evening, the erudite sage, Dr. Albert Janetto, and his beautiful, charming, fascinating, and—er—*beautiful*—ugh!—stop me if I said that before, but it's well worth repeating—to his *beautiful* protege, Venzita!"

Sixteen glasses lifted and sixteen magisterial gullets swallowed wine. Then the waiters brought on the feast, and the capital dining hall rang with knives and forks and gaiety. Sixteen magistrates listened to the gems of wisdom from the little old man in the wheel-chair, and vied with each other in a contest of wits to win approving smiles from the girl . . .

A few weeks later the same sixteen eager magistrates stood on the broad portico of the capital building and watched the builders construct the new "Temple of Visions."

Each day they looked out upon the rising walls, they congratulated themselves. This was the initial step in their new program of national culture. In spite of the New Dark Ages, they would make this capital a city of beauty!

"The City of Beauty!"

At every gateway in the city's walls they had mammoth electric signs erected to announce their reputation to the world.

And when the thousands of Rag Birds, perched in trees, heard the city's new name they laughed and laughed. They poked fun at themselves and their own dirt and misery. "Look at us!" They would shout to respectable passers-by. "We're your ornaments!" We're sittin' up here to make your city beautiful. Whoopee! Ain't we the gorgeous things!"

The magistrates, needless to say, were nettled by these ugly taunts. They took the matter up with Dr. Albert Janetto's visions. Under the spell of perfumes and colored smokes and powerful potions they dreamed up an answer to this trifling trouble. Pri-

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vate cabs for magistrates.

The appropriation was made, the private cabs were manufactured—comfortable, luxurious, and so thoroughly sound-proof that no Rag Bird's taunt could penetrate their walls. Wherewith, the magistrates congratulated themselves on having rid themselves of a disturbance.

In six months the new Temple of Visions was complete to the last gold doorknob. Mozambique strutted through its marble walled rooms with the air of a hotel proprietor followed by fifteen stockholders—his fellow magistrates. The sixteen were pleased with themselves. It was a masterpiece of extravagance.

"But definitely an investment!" they continually reminded themselves.

"Ah, yes!" said the little man in the wheel-chair. "This is an investment you shall never regret. You have been wise enough to recognize higher values. Visions can be of unlimited help to you. You have the ponderous weight of government on your shoulders. But I am now at your service—yours to command."

"Exactly!" said Mozambique. "You and your visions are to us what the special commissions were to the governments of the past—a special device for supplying those invaluable insights—"

"Precisely," another magistrate chimed in. And another, "Shall we drink to the beginning of a new era?"

"To an era of wisdom and beauty!"

"To beauty!" others echoed . . .

DR. ALBERT JANETTO watched the sixteen men march back over the ornate arched passage high over the street from his new temple to their capital building. He took a deep comfortable breath, closed his thick eyelids. Then in spite of himself he burst into laughter.

"I have arrived!" he chuckled, and his laughter trailed off in a deep, satisfied rumble. "By the gods of wit, I have arrived! And how? On a silver platter borne by sixteen stupid, silly—"

A young attendant picking up the empty glasses, turned sharply and glared. Janetto had been unaware of his presence. He found the glare disturbing, it made the blood rush to his face the way the hoots of the beggars and drifters had used to do back in the carnival days.

But Dr. Janetto was too jubilant over his mounting victories to let a mere capital attendant annoy him. His eyes narrowed sullenly.

"Run along, you!" he barked. "Get back to the capital building where you belong."

"I beg your pardon, your honor," said the young attendant. "I was about to ask you a question concerning your famous visions."

Janetto's eyes snapped open sharply. "What about them?"

"I've heard that they are very reliable, your honor, and I wondered—will anyone besides the magistrates ever have a chance to benefit by them?"

"Who, for instance?"

"Me?"

Janetto considered. He was under no contract to devote his vision facilities exclusively to the magistrates. On the other hand, he had no intention of letting any Tom, Dick, or Harry in on the pie.

But Albert Janetto was in a spot. This young man, he knew, had just overheard a dangerous tongue-slip of his. And Janetto didn't care to have an attendant go back to the capital building and report that the magistrates had been referred to as *stupid* and *silly*—

"I am always glad to exchange favors with worthy persons," he said. "When would you like to avail yourself of a

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visit to the vision room?"

"Now."

"It is customary," said Janetto, thinking that he might put this young man off, "to precede the visions with a period of soft music. But at the moment my musician, the lovely Venzita, is sleeping. I would not wake her—"

"I'll dispense with the music," said the young man. "I'm not interested in any of the trimmings. All I want is a forecast—"

"You have no doubt heard Venzita's music already?" The doctor rolled along in his new electrically-operated wheel-chair toward the vision room.

"No, I'm new here."

"You have a treat in store," Janetto smiled reflectively. "Your name?"

"Hobart."

THE doctor paused, opening the door to the newly furnished oval room. This young man was handsome in his well-pressed simple black attire. He looked as if he wouldn't be long outgrowing an attendant's uniform. His lean face, his sharp bespectacled eyes, his trim mustache and determined lips gave him the look of a man who had a destiny.

These observations sent a slight shudder through the little doctor and he regretted more than ever having made the slip that put him under obligation to this man.

But all men have their weaknesses, Janetto thought, smiling contentedly within himself.

"I'm sorry you haven't seen the lovely Venzita," he said, wheeling into the oval-shaped vision room ahead of Hobart. "Many insist on offering her magnificent gifts."

"So I've heard," said Hobart with a touch of disdain. "This temple of visions *is* a magnificent gift, your honor!"

Janetto turned in anger. "This temple is no gift! It's an investment!"

"I heard the magistrates say so," the handsome attendant laughed lightly, and Janetto detected a tinge of sneer in his mirth. "I quite agree with you that the magistrates are stupid, silly fools—"

"Don't be hasty in your interpretation!" the doctor snapped. "My remark meant no harm! You're jumping at false conclusions."

"What conclusion is there except that you've duped the all highest government officials in this capital into spending a million for a mansion for you?"

"You're talking wild!" the doctor cried. He was halfway out of his wheel-chair, his tense fingers extending like claws.

"Take it easy," the young man growled, planting his hands on his hips. "If I'm wrong, I'm wrong. You don't have to explode—"

"Listen, my friend," Janetto slipped back into his chair and his voice toned down to a confidential half-whisper. "You have an intelligent face. You're smart enough to keep your thoughts to yourself. There's no reason I shouldn't tell you exactly what I meant—then you'll know there was no harm intended."

Hobart's lips curled into a faint smile. "Well?"

"Some of those magistrates *are* silly—about my musician Venzita. They want to marry her. Oh, they don't say so, of course. Venzita is too clever. They never get far talking with her. But I, with my insight, can read their intentions. Some of them would murder their wives if they had a chance to marry Venzita. And that would be very foolish."

Janetto's frail chest heaved with relief as he divested himself of this speech. He concluded, "Now you see why I used the words silly, stupid?"

"The Temple of Visions had nothing

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to do with it?"

"Nothing."

"The visions, then, are bona fide?"

"Absolutely. Just sit here, my friend. Let me prepare the incense and the lights and you'll see for yourself. If you aren't overwhelmed by the psychological insights you receive, I'll eat this temple, stone by stone."

"Go ahead," said Hobart. "Insights are exactly what I want."

DR. JANETTO wheeled to the arched windows, pressed a switch. All of the red velvet draperies slowly drew across the stained glass panes. The oval room became a cavern of soft green light, the source of which was an intricate spider web of fine illumined tubes that spread across the curved ceiling.

The motored wheel-chair glided to the front of the room. A touch of Janetto's hand brought a soft reddish glow from the base of what appeared to be an arched proscenium, crenelated along the floor of the stage with footlight shields of weird shapes.

The red smoke began to rise in sluggish columns from the row of weird-shaped shields to float upward along the folds of purple velvet that filled the proscenium. Janetto caused the overhead web of green to fade into blackness. The oval room was now as dark as if illuminated by a single candle, glowing through red glass. The dim red glow, visible only as it reflected from the seeping wall of smoke, softened the sharpness of Hobart's eyes, melted the skepticism of his tight lips.

Janetto wheeled down to Hobart's luxurious chair, placed a small uncorked bottle and a silver-engraved goblet on the ebony shelf attached to the arm of the chair.

"Drink," he said, "as deeply as you care to. In the same measure will come your visions."

Hobart's caution had not all melted with the lights. "If I don't drink, then what? No visions?"

"That will depend upon you. I cannot guarantee—"

"You might have put poison in this bottle," said Hobart. "By mistake, of course."

"No men are ever suspicious of my vision potion," Janetto said tartly, "excepting men of evil intentions. However, you need not drink. The incense that fills this room will be strong enough in itself. I only ask that you relax, and watch the wall of red smoke with half-closed eyes—*and think upon what you see.*"

Janetto moved away to the side of the room, the lids fell slowly over the hot coals of his eyes, he breathed with the slow rhythm of sleep.

Hobart reached for the goblet, emptied the bottle into it, d r a i n e d it through his lips. He took a full relaxing breath, let his shoulders droop, let his hands fall limp over the arms of the chair. Then to make his comfort complete, he kicked off his narrow attendant's shoes and wriggled his toes against the lush carpet. He let his eyes go half closed.

Soon the softly glowing wall of perfumed smoke began to suggest pictures to him. He saw figures twist through the sluggish red coils, to rise and disappear. Stars and globes and fairy-like fancies of his mind mingled with the creeping, contorting waves of light against the deep velvety background.

The little balls of light took on clearer edges.

Now one of them hung in the center of the vision. It was a badge—the badge of a magistrate!

Back of it rose the black well-pressed attire of a capital attendant—his own suit that he was now wearing! Yes, *his*

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face was there too—and it stayed. *It and the badge.* But strangely the attendant's costume floated away.

Only his face and the badge were left!

Hobart gave a start. There could be no mistaking that! And secretly he knew that it was the very ambition that crowded his mind every hour of the day. *He would become a magistrate!*

THE vision stage darkened as Hobart's thought whirled dizzily. He muttered to himself, "But how can that be? There are already sixteen magistrates. Sixteen is the limit—"

The vision grew clear again, as if in answer to the turmoil in his mind. He saw the towering white-haired Van Hise, the oldest magistrate of all, marching along briskly—a hale and hearty old man.

Then, against the background of swirling smoke, something happened to Van Hise. He apparently tripped, he fell. He did not rise. The visions melted away.

A surge of excitement warmed Hobart's brain. He had the impulse to spring up, to get into action. If he were to become a magistrate he must start preparing himself at once. No telling how soon that venerable old Van Hise might stumble into death.

But Hobart could not manage to rise. As yet the torpor from the potion still held his body in its grip. He sank back in the chair, dizzy with magnificent ponderings.

Once more the vision came back to him. The strands of smoke wrapped into a braid of red rope that turned and coiled and lengthened into a human form. The head assumed the clearly etched lines of a girl's face, framed in a flamboyant butterfly head-dress of green and white feathers.

The girl's languid arms reached out to strum the strings of a huge golden harp.

Breathlessly Hobart watched. He had never seen the beautiful Venzita face to face, but the newspapers had often carried her pictures. There was no mistaking the loveliness of her face and figure, the enchanting grace with which her long slender fingers stroked the strings of the harp.

But suddenly the harp was not there. only the strings. What was this astonishing change?

Now the strings hung from her fingers, swung low to support the weights that were—what? *Men?* No, *puppets!*

Yes, two or three puppets dangled from each hand, and the girl manipulated the strings deftly, gracefully, with an ease that lent something of rapture to her manner. The puppets were magistrates!

Hobart looked from one to another of the doll-like figures. There was Mozambique. Here was Samos. There, Nicholas, Botticelli, Alboin . . . Now Mozambique had changed into Wyatt, Samos had melted away and in his place hung Ponchar. It was a veritable roll call of the magistrates! Eleven—twelve—thirteen of them, now fourteen.

Every magistrate but Van Hise and one other had appeared. And now the other came. Only Van Hise remained to come—or was he dead? Would the sixteenth puppet be Van Hise—*or Hobart?*

Hobart leaped up, shook off the blur before his eyes, slapped his own cheeks to bring himself out of the torpor. He bent down, seized his shoes, stormed out the rear door, hissing to himself, *"She'll never get me! Never!"*

Janetto hurried after him. "But did you see a significant vision, my friend?"

"I did!" Hobart retorted, slipping his feet into his shoes and hurrying on. He

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crossed through the marble hallway. In a quick glance to one side he saw the girl he had just seen in the vision—tall, langurous, unspeakably beautiful as she turned to look at him, her wealth of red hair sweeping against the white marble pillar. He caught up the tray of glasses and directed his footsteps straight toward the little arched footbridge that crossed high over the street to the capital building.

CHAPTER IV

Another Temple

VENZITA sauntered through the hallway to meet Janetto.

"Who was that?"

"A capital attendant," Janetto answered. "Did you have a good nap, my dear?"

"What was his name?"

"Probably Francisco or William or—no, on second thought, it was Hobart. What, *more* flowers, my dear?" Janetto cast a sour eye upon the mass of floral decorations that flanked the stage in the music room. "I wish to repeat my request—that you ask your magistrate friends to send more jewelry and fewer flowers."

"Hobart," Venzita mused. "He was rather handsome."

"Flowers are here today and gone tomorrow. Jewels—"

"It's a shame he's only attendant. I think he should have a promotion. I'll speak to one of the magistrates."

"Venzita, come here. I want to talk with you." He directed the motored wheel-chair to an open roof-porch that overlooked the capital grounds. Venzita shrugged her shoulders and strolled after him.

"Look, Venzita. What do you see out there?"

Venzita laughed. She saw the city, of course. What was he getting at? She saw the capitol grounds, and the new post-war apartments and skyscrapers, and the extensive post-war groves and orchards loaded down with fruit and clusters of Rag Birds, and the business streets rumbling with cars and trucks, and the city walls out at the edges.

"That's ours," said Janetto with a low satisfied chuckle. "All ours—*if* we work it right."

"You're doing pretty well," said Venzita cynically.

"We've got these magistrates in the hollow of our hands and that's where we'll keep them. We must never for one minute let down or they'll lose interest."

"You're not worried about somehting, are you, Albert?"

Worried? Albert Janetto never dared admit it to her but he was deathly worried every time she asked the name of some handsome man who happened to pass their way. "No, not worried," he said dryly.

She studied his mysterious old face, the deep eyes that burned with untold secret motives. She laughed. "You can't be worried Not after the magistrates have erected a million dollar temple to your arts! You're a part of the government now. They'll never let you go. Even if I should leave you some day, you're here—fixed—just like that capitol building!"

Janetto caught her hand, held it with a curious tenseness that made her grow thoughtful. She looked down at the gnarled old fingers and let her eyes rest on the brilliant topaz ring that reflected her face in miniature.

"Venzita!" he uttered the name in a whisper that was half reverence, half fear. "Don't ever dream of leaving! Don't even let yourself think of such a thing!"

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VENZITA drew her hand away and strolled along the portico. Janetto had never ceased to be a mystery to her. Didn't he realize that she had some purpose of her own?

He followed after her. "My dear, can't you forget that you began working for me simply as a hired musician? Hasn't my treatment of you proved that you are more than an employee?"

"You've always been very kind to me, Janetto. I hope I've never complained—"

"But don't you see, you're a part of the institution—an important part. Your music and your beauty have created the atmosphere necessary for our success. If you ever left me—"

"You'd get another musician—probably a better one."

"No! No! No!" Janetto fairly shrieked. "I'm trying to tell you this temple belongs to you as well as me. All these gifts—jewels, money, cars, precious stones—they're ours *jointly!* Can't I make you understand?"

"No, you old funny face, you'd just as well save your breath." Venzita stalked away from him, then turned when she heard him speeding after her in his wheel-chair. "If I have to tell you fifty more times, I'll say the same thing, Albert."

She stopped his wheel-chair with her foot, took his two crusty old hands in hers. "When you rolled out into the sticks a few years ago and told me there was a job waiting for me, I took it as a business proposition. You said my pay would be plenty of good food, fine clothes, a decent place to live, all the music lessons I wanted and all the protection I needed."

"Yes, but—"

"Well, that bargain still stands. My job is to furnish music for your customers. I don't intend to walk out on that job—at least not right away. I'm having too much fun. I've just learned to play that new harp *in tune*. So there, grandpa!"

She laughed in Janetto's face and waited for the twinkle to light his mysterious dark eyes. It was slow coming.

"You won't fall in love with any of these magistrates, Venzita?"

"Of course not!"

"Or anyone else?"

"You know no one's going to break through the defenses you've built!"

Janetto's complacent smile returned. Then his sharp-bearded chin gave a dogged thrust. "And you *will* request jewelry instead of flowers?"

"I'll do nothing of the kind!" Venzita said flatly—not with venom, simply with frank decision. "If they want to act like fools and throw their wealth at my feet, it's yours to pick up. I won't touch it!"

Janetto countered with a hurt face. He let his head fall, and touched his outspread fingers to his brow, flicking a cunning glance from under his heavy eyebrows.

The girl repeated, "I won't touch it, Albert. Not even for you—much as I love you."

Then she marched away from him murmuring to herself. "Or do I? Sometimes I wonder . . ."

CHAPTER IV

Hobart's Future Comes True

THOUGH the brisk old magistrate Van Hise was well up in years, no one guessed that he had only a few more months to live.

One night he died—quite suddenly—after a too hearty dinner in the capital dining room.

Three weeks later the capital and surrounding countryside were agog to learn that a young man named Hobart

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had been appointed to the vacancy.

Qualified? Yes, indeed!

In the first place he was experienced in capital affairs. In recent weeks he had run through a startling series of promotions, from attendant to Assistant Administrator of Expenditures. His rapid rise was almost unaccountable. But, as the newspapers blandly noted, he was a favorite of the influential Mozambique, who had often mentioned to the charming musician Venzita, that this energetic young man deserved a chance.

Moreover, Hobart was especially qualified to fill Van Hise's shoes. By some strange coincident Hobart had done extensive studies along the lines of Van Hise's legislative specialties.

Finally, Hobart was a hero, riding the crest of popularity. He was the brave man who had dared to disperse the mob of Rag Birds when they tried to march, a thousand strong, up the steps of the capital building.

That dash of boldness had made banner headlines and sensational newsmovies. Before the capital guards had lifted a hand, Hobart had appeared on the capital portico at the top of the hundred broad steps the mobsters were ascending, and stirred up an argument with them through the medium of a small powerful machine gun that chanced to be in his hands.

The Rag Birds had scattered and taken flight, and those that were too slow about it were carted away to visit hospitals or mortuaries. And a few of the leaders were induced to pay respects to the hangman. All of which made Hobart's popularity skyrocket. For there were far too many Rag Birds, as every respected and affluent citizen knew, and a busier hangman would mean a more beautiful city.

HOBART was made a magistrate. Mozambique pinned the badge on him. Samos, Nicholas and Botticelli made speeches. Janetto delivered an address from his wheel-chair. And there was entrancing harp music the rest of the evening, interspersed with toasts and lively conversation.

"Our City of Beauty is a torchlight in the new age of darkness," a newspaper editorialized. "This man Hobart, like the old go-getters of many decades ago, has risen from the ranks to a position of supreme importance. What Hobart has done, *any* citizen of this fair city could do—if he only had the *will*. Yes, even a Rag Bird, if he were determined enough!"

Clusters of Rag Birds laughed and laughed when they found that one in the newspaper.

"Imagine us," they hooted, "being made magistrates. What a hell of a sight we'd make, sitting around in the capital building throwing away money and listening to vampires play on harps! Ye gods, they're killing us!"

One lean-faced young Rag Bird scratched his shaggy head thoughtfully. "A Rag Bird *could* get to be a magistrate if he wanted to bad enough." He munched an apple authoritatively.

"Listen at that! Rustan's off again!" one of the cluster shouted.

"But he *could*. I'd bet my neck on it!" Rustan said, spitting out an apple seed.

"You'd lose your neck if you tried," retorted a heap of rags, climbing up the tree to sit in on the argument. "The only way a Rag Bird'd have a chance with those big shots would be for him to shoot down some other Rag Birds."

"Sure," someone else chimed in, munching on a piece of bark. "That's how that damned Hobart made the grade—by killing some of us off, and getting Plank and some others hanged."

"Plank was my friend as much as yours," Rustan said stubbornly, "but

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he was a fool to lead a mob up the capital steps. I tried to warn him and he wouldn't listen."

"I s'pose if you'd have been a magistrate you'd have had him hanged, same as Hobart did."

"I probably would have," said Rustan thoughtfully. "They've got it figured out that there's too many of us. I think they're right."

"Listen at him talk! Don't argue with him, the damned contrary mule." "If there's too many of us, why the hell don't the government do something about us?"

"Why should it?" said Rustan. "We never do anything about ourselves. We're satisfied to sit in the trees and throw apple-cores at the people that pass, aren't we?"

THE conversation was interrupted by a fight over an apple. Arguments were good but fights were always better. The surrounding trees poured out their occupants to gather around the dust storm where two Rag Birds had fallen and were going at each other with fists and claws.

Later, when the dust had cleared and the contestants were busy tying up their torn clothes and some rude third party was contentedly munching the prize they had fought over, Rustan's argument came back into the limelight. One of his contentious friends had a snarl left over from the previous talk.

"If you're so damned sure of yourself, Rustan, why don't you turn yourself into a magistrate?"

"Haw! Haw!" Rustan retorted dryly. "You think *I'd* crawl down from my perch to grovel on my hands and knees before a pretty girl—the way a magistrate does? You couldn't hire me!"

"Sour grapes!"

"What I mean, she's got every one of those magistrates on a toboggan," Rustan grinned. He lay back on the branch, hands locked behind his head, and gazed up into the sky. "She's an enchantress, that's what she is. Every man that comes her way is her slave. It was a lucky day for me that she walked out on me."

"You know Venzita?" Four of them asked the question at once.

"I used to know her, when her name was Mary." Rustan chuckled bitterly. "But don't worry, boys, I'll never know her again!"

CHAPTER V

Mozambique Meets His Master

THE money was ready. The plans were complete. Every single magistrate was ready to go ahead with the gigantic project—except—Hobart.

Mozambique led him by the arm past the walls of blueprints. This new three-million-dollar edifice would make the City of Beauty the most renowned of all the continent's capitals—the leader of culture in an age of darkness.

"You're too practical, Hobart. You haven't the proper appreciation of beauty. Now you take Magistrate Samos. At first he was dubious, like you—"

"I know," said Hobart. "He went to tell that damned little wizard Janetto about his doubts, had a sparkling conversation with Venzita, and came back insisting that another wing be added to the original plan."

"Consider the case of Wyatt," said Mozambique. "He is one of our most conservative magistrates, and yet—"

"I know about Wyatt," Hobart retorted. "He attended a banquet with Venzita and her mystic grandpa and came back with big ideas about adding an Italian garden with fountains and a

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ceiling of artificial stars."

"All these men are cautious about dipping into the city's treasury—except for the worthiest of purposes."

"Puppets!" Hobart muttered. "Simply puppets."

"Magistrate Alboin was hesitant at first. He objected to clearing the business streets and four blocks of apartments for the site. But after he discovered how the buildings were aging—"

"And how beautiful Venzita looked in that new gown that's three-fourths sapphires—he saw the light."

"He saw the light!" Mozambique cleared his throat. He was getting nowhere. The other magistrates were impatient with him because he had failed to swing his young protege into line.

"Did it ever occur to you, Mozambique, that this girl has turned the whole bunch of you into spineless jellyfish?"

Ignoring the remark, Mozambique flopped into a chair and beat his fists on the arms. "What are we going to do with you, Hobart?" he cried in exasperation. "We can't quit at a Temple of Visions. We've got to go on—build a Temple of Music—eventually a Temple of Art. Why the devil can't you give us your vote, so we can go ahead?"

"Save your voice," Hobart growled. "You need a unanimous vote. I'm voting against you. You're stymied, that's all." Then with a note of sarcasm, he added. "If you're so wrought up about it why don't you and the other magistrates go to Doc Janetto and get a vision and see what can be done?"

"No good."

"A million-dollar Temple of Visions *no good?*"

"You know what I mean." Mozambique mopped the perspiration from his baked-apple nose and his pancake ears. "Not one of us fifteen magistrates can go to Janetto now. Not until we've voted the appropriation. We can't face Venzita. Every damned magistrate has promised her he's railroading this Temple of Music through as a special private favor to her."

"Tsk, tsk, Mozam! Nice business!"

"Shut your head and let me think."

WHICH was as far as Mozambique could get during the next twenty-four hours. He came up before the assembled magistrates with plenty of perspiration but no inspiration.

"We'll take one more vote," he said in a voice that tolled the death of his dream of culture.

They cast their ballots. The count was the same as before—fifteen for, one against.

"That settles it," said Mozambique. "The Temple of Music is lost."

"I move," said one of the magistrates, "that Hobart be delegated to convey this news to our official court musician, Venzita."

"I gladly volunteer," Hobart snapped contemptuously.

A crash of glass brought the magistrates to their feet. Stones burst through the windows and glanced off their conference table. The magistrates scurried back to the walls and columns for protection, and Hobart reached for a pistol.

"Hold it!" shouted one of the guards from outside the window. "We've got 'em! Damned Rag Birds!"

A clatter of head-beatings and fist-poundings filled the air for half a minute, then the voices of the guards took complete charge. Above the clodding of feet of those Rag Birds making their get-away, the sharp orders of the guards barked out. "In there, you! You'll hang for this. And you, too, Wobbles. But *this* guy—he's the one that tried to stop them. Send him in for a talk. We can do some good with him."

"This guy," who was no other than

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Rustan, proved to be a tough customer. The chief of the guards was convinced that Rustan, if handled properly, could be played as a trump for law and order. A Rag Bird that tried to restrain his fellows from doing mischief was a rare bird indeed, and that was what Rustan had been caught in the act of doing.

"He's got the makings of a bodyguard," the chief of guards reported to the magistrates the next day. "Let me work on him."

"Be sure he doesn't work on you," they retorted, noting the chief's black eye. The fact was that Rustan had tried to fight his way out, believing he would be hanged with the others. The guards had subdued him with guns and pinned him down with questions. He had done his best to lie out of his heroic role.

Forced to admit that he had tried to dissuade his companions from throwing rocks, he had been unwilling to take any credit for it. "I hate the magistrates as much as any Rag Bird," Rustan had growled, "but I've got sense enough not to go around picking fights."

"We're going to give you a chance," the chief guard declared.

"I don't want it," Rustan retorted.

"We're ready to play fair with Rag Birds like you. We're going to give you a job."

RUSTAN grunted. He knew what these big shots were driving at. They were trying to stem the tide of more Rag Bird trouble by tossing out a few favors. He bristled with the snobbery of an aristocrat.

"No job for me," he growled. "I don't mind the dirt of living in the parks and orchards, but I don't want to get messed up with magistrates."

He was assigned to Hobart, who lacked a bodyguard. A guardsman's cap was stuck on his head, a preposterously large sword was belted around his ragged clothes, and he was pronounced ready for his first order.

Hobart gave him a scornful eye. "You can't stick around me looking that way. You've got to be hosed down and uniformed from head to toe."

Rustan shrugged; then Hobart told him to come on, they'd take care of the uniform later.

And so, less than twenty-four hours after the glass-crashing, less than ten hours after the latest Rag Bird hangings, Rustan found himself dragging along at the heels of the starchy, trim-mustached young magistrate, without the slightest idea where he was going.

They passed out of the capital building by way of an arched footbridge, high over the street—and then Rustan saw that they were entering the Temple of Visions.

"I'd better wait outside," said Rustan.

"Come along, Rags," Hobart barked. "With you for a contrast, my appearance should be perfect."

CHAPTER VI

A Shock for Venzita

VENZITA looked up at the two approaching figures as they entered the amber-lighted music room. Her hands released the golden harp, her slim fingers went to her lips stifling a little cry of surprise.

Her gaze lingered on the tall, ragged figure outrageously adorned with a huge sword and a guardsman's cap. With any other face that mixed costume would have been a comic cartoon. But Venzita's gaze grew intent, spellbound. She knew that face!

"Don't mind the caricature, Miss Venzita," said Hobart, marching up confidently. "I dragged him out of the

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junk wagon to make a bodyguard out of him . . . I'm speaking to you, Miss Venzita."

Venzita nodded slowly to Hobart, mumbled a low, "Your honor," and her eyes went back to meet Rustan's steady, impenetrable gaze. There was more than recognition in the Rag Bird's expression. There was challenge, accusation. Venzita's heart beat wildly.

Hobart's sharp voice intruded upon her shocked senses. "What's the matter, Miss Venzita?"

"N-nothing."

"If you're expecting me to apologize for the appearance of my bodyguard, forget it. I've come to deliver a court message . . . Will you do me the favor to quit looking at that rag heap? I've come to talk with you."

"I beg your pardon. Please be seated, your honor—and—sir." She put her harp aside and led the way across to the powder-blue upholstered divan. Rustan, however, remained standing. Venzita shot an anxious glance at him, then managed to turn her back toward him. "Your honor seems a trifle impatient," she said to Hobart.

"I'm one magistrate who isn't overconcerned by your whims, Miss Venzita," Hobart answered rather too politely.

"I'm quite aware of that," said Venzita, "and I'm a little surprised."

Hobart laughed lightly. "Rather disturbing, isn't it, to find that one magistrate out of sixteen can't be made into a puppet."

"You're all mixed up, Mr. Hobart, if you think I'm running a puppet show. My business is music."

"Music!" Hobart arched an eyebrow contemptuously.

"Most people appreciate music, Mr. Hobart, but a few—alas—don't have it in them. The ratio is about fifteen to one, I believe."

"I happen to have a practical turn of mind," said Hobart sullenly.

"That's why I'm surprised to see how you hate me," Venzita smiled politely, "considering that it was my suggestion to Mozambique that made you a magistrate. Would you care for a drink, your honor?" She rang for a waiter.

FORTIFIED with a few gulps from the goblet the waiter brought him, Hobart steeled himself to his task. "I've come to tell you—" he hestitated, perhaps disturbed by the motion of her hand as she brushed the careless waves of red hair that fell across her bare shoulder. She was beautifully dressed. That gown of sapphires only accentuated her loveliness.

"You started to say—"

"Oh, yes—about that Temple of Music—"

"Yes?" Her eyes were suddenly eager, like a child's when a gift is about to be unwrapped. Then her intent manner vanished, her lips lost their smile, her eyes anticipated disappointment. She quickly turned to Rustan, asked, "Does your master ever explain his grudge against me?"

The young magistrate countered with a turn of the subject. He shot a blunt question that put Venzita on her metal. "Why do you want to string all the magistrates? Why don't you choose one and marry him?"

"I—I wouldn't think of it!" she uttered breathlessly.

"There!" said Hobart vindictively. "You admit you're playing a game. You're letting them make love to you when you've no intention of—"

"They're *not* making love to me!"

"They're giving you gifts!"

"Yes—that is, Janetto—"

"They're proposing to you, aren't they?"

"Some of them have—"

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"How many?"

"Well, fourteen or fifteen. But I don't take it seriously. Most of them are already married, and I haven't the slightest affection for them—*that* way, I mean. They're friends, of course, but—"

"You're cheating them!" Hobart cried. He was on his feet now, pointing an accusing finger at her. "You're leading them on—"

"I'm not!" Venzita sprang up and started away.

"Wait!" Hobart snapped, following her. He caught her hand. "Young lady," a little of the harshness went out of his voice, "you needn't try to deny it. You're practicing the art of an enchantress. You're making it your business to weave a spell around every male that comes your way. You're exercising a magic power—"

"You lie!"

ANOTHER voice broke in—the low rich voice of Rustan. "I think he's right, Miss Venzita. At least that's the way the Rag Birds have got it figured."

"Rus—*sir!*" the girl gasped. She looked at him, transfixed. She was unaware that Hobart was still holding her hand, gripping it a little tighter as she tried to draw it away.

"The Rag Birds say you must be different from other women," Rustan pursued. "You'll never want to marry. You'll only want to make men your slaves."

"No! No! NO!" Glistening tears filled the girl's eyes. The words terrified her. "You don't understand!" she cried. "I want to love and be loved, the same as anyone else. But—"

"But what?" Hobart demanded.

Her answer came in a low breathless whisper. "What chance have I had to be myself? All I've learned since Janetto undertook to train me has made me what I am. I've no desire to be an enchantress. But every song I sing, every word I say seems to make men fall at my feet."

"And you scorn them!" said Hobart.

"Janetto has drilled me in the arts of eluding them, teasing them with songs and laughter, and keeping out of their reach like a butterfly. It's all that I know to do."

At that moment a door far down the hall opened and Dr. Albert Janetto emerged. He was returning from a vision.

The three fell silent as he approached the arched entrance of the music room. He gazed in, said nothing. Venzita noticed that he was strangely pale. She wondered what vision had come to him.

"Will you join us, Albert?" she called to him. "Mr. Hobart and his bodyguard have come to bring us a message about the—" She stopped, her words choked down.

"About the Temple of Music," Dr. Janetto," said Hobart.

Janetto nodded weakly. He waited. "Well, what is the message?"

"What *is* the message, Mr. Hobart?" Venzita repeated timorously, her fingers light upon his hand.

Hobart's eyes passed over her lightly and turned to Janetto. "By my vote," he said tonelessly, "the appropriation has passed. The Temple of Music will be built—in honor of Venzita."

CHAPTER VII

A Visitor in the Night

FROM that night Dr. Albert Janetto's manner became a puzzle. With passing weeks his top-of-the-world spirit was eclipsed in a fog that grew blacker.

"Is Dr. Janetto ill?" the servants would ask Vanzita. "Is he afraid of something?"

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Venzita had no answer. The little old man in the wheelchair volunteered no information about his worries. She asked no questions.

In fact, she avoided talking with him, and when they dined with visiting magistrates their eyes did not meet.

The servants' gossip ran to weird terrorized whisperings. Nor was their talk all concerned with Dr. Janetto. The beautiful Venzita came in for her share of their remarks.

"Her music is growing flat." "Not flat—*low!*" "Low—flat—it's all the same. Anyhow the spirit's gone out of it." "She's quit practicing—spends all her time in her room."

In her room Venzita would ponder the question that she did not dare to confide in Janetto's visions. She was afraid of the answer.

Were Hobart and Rustan right? Was she an enchantress, playing a game, tossing men's hearts round like dice?

Over and over that conversation re-echoed in her ears. She avoided facing herself in the mirror. She would stray along the railing of the roof-garden, looking down listlessly upon the expanse of city.

Even those miserable outcasts clustered like vultures in the trees held her in scorn!

And the more respectable classes—the ones who paid taxes into the city's treasury—were beginning to talk, she knew. They were angry over that three million dollar appropriation. They were petitioning for a delay in the clearance of the site for the New Temple of Music.

How far would their protests go? How soon would their hatreds infect the magistrates themselves?

And what had the dashing young Hobart reported back to his fifteen fellow-magistrates? Probably he had knocked the props out from under every man of them who secretly hoped to marry her. He had only to quote her own words!

But Hobart would have added embellishments of his own. No doubt about that! She could almost hear him saying, "She's a cheat! She'll never have an ounce of love for any man. That damned little old wizard's tricks have crushed all of that out of her."

NIGHT came over the city. Venzita lingered out on the roof garden looking up at the deep blue summer sky. A servant came to remind her that supper would be served at her pleasure; the doctor had already eaten and returned to his visions. Venzita was not interested.

She lay in the hammock watching wisps of silver-edged clouds sift across the stars. She thought back to the summer when she had worked for two short weeks on a farm in the Blue Valley—side by side with Rustan.

She had been herself back in those days. No one could have made her believe she would ever be surrounded by all this fabulous world of wealth and finery. Why had it come to her? Could it be that she *was* an enchantress, gifted with a special sort of magic power to make men do her bidding?

"If so—*if this is true*—"

The turmoil of thought carried her deep into the night before she completed that sentence.

"If that's true, I might as well make the most of it!"

And suddenly her mind was filled with a wish, too terrible and ghastly to pass her lips. If she could make men do her bidding—yes—yes—yes!

A little *whirr* sounded from the air just beyond the roof garden. Venzita thought it must be a nighthawk coasting down out of the sky.

It came again—and stopped with a solid click. She ran to the railing, dis-

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covered that a loop of lithe rope had caught upon a steel post. The rope extended straight down into the night shadows of the temple wall. Someone had tossed that loop up from below.

Yes, there was a uniformed figure climbing up the rope. In a moment he was over the railing, standing tall and straight before her. He called her by name, a name she had almost forgotten, "Mary!"

"Rustan!" How fine and handsome he was in that guardsman's uniform, complete with scabbard and sword. She led him into a path of light, gazed at him. Every trace of the shaggy Rag Bird was gone. This was a new Rustan. Disturbingly new. Venzita would have given anything in the world to see a little of the old friendly gleam in his eyes.

"Mary," he whispered hoarsely. "I had to come. Don't think for a minute that you've charmed me here the way you do the magistrates. I'm made of different stuff, Mary. I've been a drifter, a rebel, a Rag Bird—and I'm too hard-boiled ever to be knocked off my pegs by any feminine wiles. But I had to come—to warn you!"

"What is it, Rustan?"

"If you've got a grain of honesty left in you, Mary, for God's sakes run away from this place."

Venzita gasped. "Run away—with a three million dollar honor about to be built for me?"

"How are you ever going to get out of this trap, Mary?"

THE girl did not answer until she had cast a cautious eye over the dimly lighted roof-porch. She spoke in a low voice. "Some day Janetto will die, Rustan." Her eyes held his in a tense grip. "When that happens, this tangled web I've walked into will dissolve."

"He'll die—" It was Rustan's eyes that held hers. "You're sure that—"

His sentence was lost in a moment of audible breathing. She felt his strong hands close tightly upon hers, felt the sharp scrutiny of his gaze.

He said, "Where is Janetto?"

"In the vision room."

"I'd like to see him."

"He's in no mood to receive visitors. Besides, he may stay with his visions until dawn."

"I'll wait," said Rustan. "I don't often get away from Hobart. And it was no cinch getting in here past your guards. I've got to make this trip count."

Venzita led him through the palace halls. A servant stopped them near the vision room door with a sharp bark. "He's not to be disturbed, Miss Venzita."

"We won't disturb him," the girl retorted. "Mr. Rustan will wait."

"This is very irregular, Miss Venzita," the servant protested. "The guards were not supposed to admit any guests. It's an hour past midnight."

"Time for you to be off duty," Venzita snapped.

The servant nodded. "My apologies, Miss—"

"See that Mr. Rustan is made comfortable while he waits," she ordered. "I'll return to the roof garden."

The servant bent over backwards to comply. He took Rustan's cap, coat, sword and scabbard to the hall-tree; he supplied Rustan with a cool drink, a newspaper, an electric fan. Then, hoping that everything was satisfactory, he retired.

Venzita returned to the roof garden alone. She preferred to leave Rustan to his own devices. Obviously he was bitter in his determination to keep himself outside the grasp of her power. But would he?

An hour passed. She glanced in, saw

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him sauntering along gazing idly at the paintings on the corridor walls. He drifted into the drawing room. She returned to the railing under the stars—listening, waiting.

At length the gray of dawn showed on the horizon. She heard Rustan's footsteps.

"I can't afford to wait any longer," he muttered. "In fact, I realize it's too late to talk with him."

Again that sharp exchange of glances, crystal clear in the hazy darkness, like the passing of secrets no words could fathom.

"Perhaps everything has been done that can be," Venzita breathed.

"I'm sure of it."

Rustan clutched her hand for an instant, then thrust himself away. He climbed over the edge of the railing, let himself down hand-over-hand by the rope.

Venzita's eyes followed him. In the dim light she saw the faint gleam of his scabbard—*saw that it was empty!*

"Your sword, Rustan!" she gasped. "Where—"

Then she caught her breath. He hadn't heard. But he must have known—

CHAPTER VIII

Murder

THE following forenoon a guardsman's sword was found jammed solidly through Dr. Albert Janetto's chest. The point of the blade showed sharp and bright through the back of the wheel-chair.

The little old figure looked more mystical than ever, his thick eyelids puffed out deathly white within the rims of black lashes, his little black beard stabbing out arrogantly from his chin.

The magistrates quickly gathered to view the scene of his death. They mumbled dry comments about the warmth of the room, the heaviness of the incense, the slightness of the blood pool in the lush carpet.

The news spread as fast as voices and radiotelephones could carry it. The verdict of the public was only half a jump of that of the courts.

"This proves you can't make the Rag Birds over into decent citizens," was the verdict of the public.

The official court verdict was simply, "Guilty of murder"—and it was reached before Rustan was found. Justice in the City of Beauty was famous for its speed.

The police found Rustan in his old rags, asleep in a tree. His guardsmen's uniform they discovered in one of the Rag Birds' treasure chests—a junk heap.

The hanging was set for the following Saturday at dawn.

The news grapevined to every Rag Bird grove for miles around. So they'd got Rustan! Rustan—that damned contrary argufier who was always putting the kibosh on harmless little escapades of stealing and window-smashing. Yep, they'd got him. He'd gone to the capital building and let them stick him in a uniform. Then he'd stuck his neck out and they'd tossed a noose around it. And the grand yank was set for Saturday dawn.

A modest little delegation of twenty-five dirty ragged creatures huddled before Rustan's bars and carried on their visit under the hard eyes of the uniformed guards.

"You didn't do it!" the Rag Bird spokesman growled. "We know you too well."

Rustan shook his head. "No man knows what another will do under strange circumstances. I didn't know, myself, that I'd do it. But I claim that

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any man will kill if his purpose is strong enough."

THE Rag Birds waggled their eyebrows. The motive back of this murder, they knew, was something that the whole city was baffled about.

"Purpose, hell!" The spokesman stroked his stubbled brown chin. "You've got as much purpose as a runaway tornado. What's Janetto to you, dead or alive?"

"It's Venzita—Mary—"

Rustan's word's brought forth a low uproar of mutterings. That name Venzita was poison.

"But it's not the way you think," Rustan protested. "Hell, you couldn't understand unless you'd known her before, like I did. I'm telling you, before she fell into Janetto's clutches, she was—" He puffed a long breath through his lips and rolled his eyes toward the ceiling of his cell. "Well, I'm ready to give my life to see her free of the old chisler—that's the long and short of it."

The guards picked up their ears. So Venzita's wish was back of this killing! That slip would make headlines!

"You freed her, all right!" the spokesman grunted. "And what good is she to you, I'd like to know, when you're a dried-up apple on a hangman's tree?"

"So I'm not the lucky man!" Rustan snapped. "You don't have to rub it in. She's free just the same. Why don't you go and leave me alone?"

His anger and confusion socked them between the eyes. They blinked, rose awkwardly, trailed away in little groups, talking to themselves. The spokesman looked back and muttered, "I still say you didn't do it!"

The day's headlines set the city's nerves on edge. From the masses of workers and respectable citizens to the wealthiest and most respected barons, all felt the shock of Venzita's uncanny power as never before.

As if it weren't enough that she had made the magistrates a bunch of doddering fools; that she had cost the city a million for a Temple of Visions and was about to cost them three million more; that the very sight of her had driven sober men to drink, or madness, or senseless exploits of daring, or suicide—and their wives into fits of jealousy. Now her wiles were driving men to murder—and what good was a Temple of Visions after its chief mystic was murdered?*

Everyone talked. It was the Rag Birds who acted.

ON the Friday afternoon before the hangman's dawn, a massed army of dirty faces, ragged hair and clothes, naked arms and legs, marched toward the capital building. Thousands strong, it was an army of noise. With thundering voices, clashing pans and pipes and tin cans and all the other choice noise-makers from the choicest junk-heaps, it was a masterpiece in pandemonium.

The newspapers declared, afterward, that in noise-making alone this army set a new high for the New Dark Ages.

As the mass moved toward the hundred broad steps that led to the capital portico, their shouts and noise-beats and marching steps took on a grotesque rhythm.

Guards assembled on the portico,

*History and legend, are full of stories on enchantresses and sorceresses, all very lovely, who have cast their spell over men and enthralled them in a net of witchcraft. Sheba was one, and Cleopatra, and Circe. The oracle of Delphi was only a whisper in a well, but her attendants were lovely girls who were selected to keep the temple in order. It is to be suspected that there was nothing of magic in the power these women held over men, but simply their beauty, and the weird atmosphere they wove around themselves, that made men's minds reel to the unknown.—Ed.

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tightened their grips on machine guns. Terrorized magistrates gathered back of them, mumbling incoherent orders, waving their hands frantically.

The mob chant welled up to them. *"We want Rustan . . . We want Rustan. . . ."*

The guards would shoot the instant a foot struck the first step. Magistrates held their ears. The mob leaders waved their army on, the chant deepened, the last few yards before the steps narrowed—

Suddenly the shrill cry of a girl rang across the capital portico.

"Don't shoot them! Don't! Don't!"

Venzita raced across the portico, fought her way through dumfounded guards and fear-paralyzed magistrates, chased down the steps.

"Wait! Stop! I've got to talk to you!" Her hair fluttered loosely in the wind, the afternoon sun glinted across her waving arms, set fire to the thousand sapphires of her flowing gown. "You've got to hear me!"

Her words would have been futile, of course, but an attendant with a presence of mind that would win him a picture and a column in all the Sunday papers, raced after her dragging a microphone. Her words, ". . . hear me!" jumped through the loudspeakers all over the capital grounds.

The mob stopped.

There's something about a beautiful girl. If Mozambique or any of the other magistrates thought that only their artistic eyes or their advanced levels of human refinement were capable of a full appreciation of feminine beauty, here was a moment for them to remember.

The mob stopped and went silent.

And if any man from the proud and arrogant Hobart to the meanest Rag Bird believed that this enchantress, the one and only Venzita, always employed her beauty and her cunning for selfish ends—here was a moment to give them pause.

They paused, and every man of them was breathless as he listened to her words.

"You Rag Birds have come to protest the innocence of your friend Rustan." Her voice filled all outdoors; and for all its volume it was a voice of compassion. "You are right. Rustan is innocent. . . ." The distant buildings echoed back across the heads of the silent army. "You think I have used trickery to cast blame for this deed upon Rustan . . . You are right. I—I alone—am guilty."

She walked down the steps slowly, carrying the microphone with her. The mob began to fall back. She extended her hand in a gesture of invitation.

"I ask that the leaders of this crowd please come forward. I invite you to sit in conference with the magistrates, to make sure that justice is done."

CHAPTER IX

A Conviction; a Confession; a Proposal

A NEW trial was begun within an hour.

The magistrates squirmed, but they acceded to Venzita's plan: the Rag Bird leaders were given a voice.

In fact, every class in the City of Beauty had a representative on deck to confer with the assembled magistrates. After all, a three million dollar public project would rise or fall with the verdict.

After a two hour battle of pros and cons, the magistrates went into a private huddle to total up the scores.

If they hanged Rustan, they would have Rag Bird mob trouble on their hands, that was a cinch; and it might grow to serious proportions. But if they hanged Venzita, the Rag Birds would be pacified.

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So would the barons, the laborers, the middle class. A lot of their trouble would dissolve if Venzita's confession were accepted at face value. Family squabbles would vanish; confidence in the magistrates would improve, three million dollars would be saved.

And among the magistrates themselves, considerable jealousy and antagonism could be salved over if the law took its course. And if Hobart's earlier judgment was sound—if every one of them was being taken for a ride—if the girl had not the slightest intention ever of marching to the altar with any of them, in spite of all their gifts and soft words—

"In the interests of justice," Mozambique finally conceded, "we have no course but to accept her confession. She is guilty."

The magistrates nodded. From every viewpoint the verdict was sound. Venzita would hang at dawn.

But at that moment one lone dissenter rose to his feet and banged on the table. "In the interests of justice —hell!" Hobart exploded. "We proved my bodyguard guilty. He's still guilty. The evidence is still there, just like we found it. It hasn't changed one whit!"

"Tut-tut! We have a confession!"

"The confession's a lie. It was a lie to save us from that mob. That girl's as innocent as the day she was born—"

"Hold on, Hobart. You were the one who told us she was double crossing us—" They all shouted at once. "He's mad." "He's in love with her." "He fell harder than anyone." "She's still an enchantress—and a murderer!"

Hobart was mad. He proved it with his fists. He fought until they called the guards in self-defense. Not until he was dragged away, were they able to continue the business of the hour.

"The verdict, then, is guilty—by a fifteen to one decision."

MOZAMBIQUE cleared his throat. He foresaw that it would be a pleasanter matter to inform the girl that the decision was not quite unanimous. He would let her believe that *he,* at least, had held her to be innocent.

Rustan was released. Venzita was placed behind the bars.

The night came on. The dim lights of the prison corridor cast bars of black shadows across the cot where Venzita sat. She listened to the clocks strike the hours away toward midnight. Guards brought her food, but she refused it.

She buried her head in her arms. Images tortured her eyes—images of ugly Rag Birds coming toward her in a mass, shouting at her, blaming her for everything . . .

She looked up to see Mozambique standing outside her bars.

"I wanted to be with you in these last hours," his words made her smile bitterly. "You're too beautiful to die. You must know that I held you innocent to the last. If there was anything I could do . . ."

Venzita turned her head. She did not look up until she knew Mozambique was gone.

Other magistrates came from time to time, each trying in turn to salve his conscience by protesting that it was he who had cast the one vote for her innocence. She listened to none of them.

A little before dawn Hobart came. She gazed at him steadily through the bars, saw the bruises on his handsome face. So the guards were right, Hobart had fought to change the verdict —to save her!

"Let him in," she said to the guard.

The gate locked back of Hobart! the guard stood by, straining to catch the whispered words that passed between the young magistrate and the condemned girl.

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"You faked that confession," Hobart said tensely, "to stop the mob. All right, you saved the magistrates a lot of slaughter, but I'll be damned if we're going to let you pay with your life."

"The mob is still there," said Venzita. "If you hang Rustan you'll have a revolution on your hands."

"I'm going to get you out of here, Beautiful, if I have to knock down the guards and take you by force. We'll run away. We'll be married—"

"You're talking wild."

"I *am* wild—I've been wild for you from the minute I saw you . . . You love me, Venzita!"

The girl answered in slow soft-spoken words. "You're wrong there, Hobart. The one person I love—the one I've loved all my life—the one I'll keep on loving till my last hour is up—is Rustan."

A flame of red shot through Hobart's face, then his cheeks and the knuckles of his hands went cold white. "So that was why you confessed! To save that murdering Rag Bird!" Hobart breathed hard through his clamped teeth. He whirled toward the barred door, flinging a cutting farewell back at her. "All right. You can take your medicine."

"Your love for me melts rather quickly—"

"Love! That word is blasphemy on your lips! You're a damned enchantress, playing your game! You'll never have a sincere emotion as long as you live!"

VENZITA threw herself in his path before the guard could open the way for him. "If that's what I am to you—" the potent challenge of her voice broke off. The hint of enraged decision in her eyes, the momentary flash of something sinister upon her lips, softened. Her eyelids lowered plaintively, she murmured a half-audible, "Hobart!"

Her hand reached out to him, her slim fingers caught his coat sleeve ever so lightly. "It's goodby now, Hobart." She gave a little swallow. "I'm seeing you for the last time."

The anger in Hobart's eyes fixed in a sullen glazed expression. He saw that she wanted to talk. He took a slow, deep breath. She led him back to the farther corner of the cell.

"Hobart, before my time is up, there's one favor you can do for me." She looked at him appealingly. The magnetism of her eyes sent a tremor through him. He started to turn, she clung to his hand. Then her fingers rested on his shoulder.

"Is—is it something within reason?" he asked quietly.

Smiling faintly, she shook her head. "It's utterly irrational, Hobart. But a girl who is about to die deserves one favor, doesn't she? Even if it is unreasonable?" Her tantalizing charm held him. "I'm asking you, Hobart. . . . Will you grant my wish?"

DAWN came. Blood-red skies in the east announced that the hour for the hanging was at hand.

Rag Birds climbed down out of their trees, plain citizens by the thousands filtered through the park groves to the open parade grounds beyond. Barons drove up in their silver-nosed cars. All gathered in around the circular fence, surging with the same curiosity that had taken them to Janetto's funeral a few days before.

They stared open-mouthed. For many, who had followed the enchantress' fabulous career through the newspapers, this was to be the first—and last—actual glimpse of her.

Not a very satisfactory glimpse; the fence held them too far back.

The prison wagon made its way through the vast circle of spectators to

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the center of the open arena. The white-garbed figure was conducted to the hangman's tree.

In a few minutes it was all over. Gradually the crowd broke up, though many groups lingered, some pointing to the dead dangling figure, trying to convince themselves that they could discern something of the girl's characteristic languor in her last pose as she hung there.

Though of course they couldn't, even with the aid of glasses. The white-sheeted covering was too complete. Besides, as the hangman and the inner circle of guards knew, the figure wasn't Venzita.

VENZITA and the tall well-dressed young man who sat beside her at the wheel of the private sound-proof cab gave a farewell wave to the police escort that had accompanied them ten miles beyond the city's walls. The cab, inscribed with the words, "Magistrate Number 16," sped on toward the distant mountains.

"Where am I taking you?" the young man asked. "To Blue Valley?"

"*You* may go there if you wish," Venzita answered languidly. "As for me—drop me off any time you like."

Rustan smiled at her but she refused to look at him. He cut his speed, tried to put his arm around her. She shrank out of his grasp. He drew the car to a stop, turned to face her.

"See here, Mary, I let you go out of my life once. I'll never be fool enough to make that mistake again . . . What's the matter, Mary?"

That elusive hint of terror in her face was there again, as it had been the moment she had picked him up. "Please, Rustan, don't fall in love with me—"

"That's something you can't stop," Rustan laughed. "All your uncanny power to make men do your bidding couldn't hold me at bay. We're going to be married—"

The girl shook her head violently. "Do you think I could ever respect you after what you did?"

Rustan narrowed his eyes. "You mean—"

"That you became my slave the same as every other man." She looked into the distance hazily. Her words came painfully, breathlessly, like a secret confession that had to be made. "Now I could no more love you than I could love Hobart. That poor sap—he knew me for what I was—an enchantress playing my evil power—so—"

"Yes?"

"I made him pay. I caught him in the trap of my will—I forced him to write a confession that *he* had murdered Janetto, and I let him hang for it."

Rustan raised an eyebrow, nodded half-comically. "Good going!"

"But, Rustan," the girl choked, "can you realize how terrifying it is to me to know that I have such power? To know that you—or any man that I might fall for—will turn puppet at my slightest glance—"

"I'll see that you get over that notion, as far as I'm concerned, Mary."

"I know what you think, Rustan. You and Hobart and I had the same flash that night the three of us met. We thought that my life could be restored if Janetto were out of the way. All three of us conceived a murder in that moment. But it was a futile deed, Rustan. All my life I'll despise you for doing it, because you did it in obedience to my evil will."

"And you were going to hang for it—"

"Because in the deepest sense I was guilty."

"If I hadn't done it," said Rustan, smiling casually, "would you have dared to?"

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VENZITA shrank involuntarily at the thought—answer enough for Rustan. He laughed. She would never have committed a murder.

"You're no more guilty than I am," he said. "And you're not half as much an enchantress as you think . . . No, you're not! You didn't make me do murder, and you didn't extort a fake statement from Hobart."

The girl went slightly pale and her eyelids fluttered. "I'm a little dizzy. Did you say—"

"You'd better have some air," Rustan laughed, throttling the cab along. "After you had me released, our friend Hobart saw his pack of cards shattering. He had counted on my being hanged—and quickly—for he knew I had the goods on him. I'll admit you sold the hanging to him in short order; but with me free and in cahoots with the capital's bodyguards, he knew it was coming. His quick decision saved him from facing a public scandal."

"Eloise is a nice girl, but she has absolutely no sex appeal."

"You mean—Hobart *was* guilty?"

"As guilty as a worm in an apple. He must have followed me up the rope to your roof garden that night, intent on using my sword. On my way down, hand over hand, I made the discovery that someone had gone down ahead of me—with blood-stained hands. Another bodyguard and I caught Hobart washing his bloody hands—and that's when I hit for the trees to keep from getting shot—or poisoned, like Van Hise."

"Van Hise!" Venzita gasped. "That was another murder he wrote into his confession—and I thought he did it for a joke!"

"For an enchantress, you're darned innocent," Rustan laughed.

Venzita laughed at herself as the car rolled along, her thoughts drifting back over the strange events. Suddenly she gave a little shriek.

"Rustan, you would have been hanged!"

"If it hadn't been for you—yes. I thought you were in love with Hobart. My hanging would have left him in the clear."

Venzita gave a horrified gasp, then another little shriek of terror. "Rustan, *I* would have been hanged—if—if Hobart hadn't come—"

"Not on your life, Mary. Those capital guards have their own grapevine that reaches all the way to the hangman, and every man of them was on my side. Where are we going, Mary?"

The mountains were looming purple and blue on the distant horizon. The girl edged closer to Rustan, put her hand in the crook of his elbow. Her red hair fluttered against his shoulder.

She spoke a bit timidly, for one with such a reputation for enchantment. "Would you care for a honeymoon in Blue Valley?"

Rustan grinned. "The season's right for making hay."

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The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

(Concluded from page 6)

ASKS Paul Carter, 156 S. University St., Blackfoot, Idaho: "Who is Bernard C. Gilford? The name does not strike a responsive chord in my mind."

Well, Paul, he doesn't strike any chord in our mind, either. We just got a story from a guy named Gilford, it was good, we bought it, and we published it. But we never heard of him before, and we haven't heard from him since. Proving, maybe, that anybody who sends us a good story has just as good a chance to sell us as our pet writers, who have the "goods" on us regarding our past. Take Arthur T. Harris, for example: He knows about that time we—never mind! Let's skip that! Anyway, Gilford may even be a pen name for Harris, trying to put one over on us in a sly way. Funny how authors sometimes like to kid editors! But maybe this will smoke him out, if he's a real honest-to-gosh "person."

Funny, too, how our readers suspect every new name. Cut it out, boys.

SINCE we're fooling around with odd bits from readers who address personal letters to us, we'll add one more. Roger Sklar, 1950 Andrews Ave., The Bronx, N. Y., asks: "Is there really such a story by the name of 'Mystery of The Martian Pendulum'? or is that just a come-on to make us buy next month's mag?"

In a way, it *is* a come-on. Because you'll be a-sap not to get the October issue of our companion magazine, *Amazing Stories*, where, to our utter surprise, the story in question appears this month. There not only is such a story, but it's a swell job of story-telling.

WOULD you like to have a glimpse at the next issue of *Fantastic Adventures?* Okay, here're a few hints. Burroughs takes Carson of Venus into new adventures in "The Living Dead." The cover for this story is the finest one St. John has done, and one we'll certainly add to our collection of framed paintings on our office wall (for readers to see when they pay us visits).

Then there's Nat Schachner's sensational story, "Eight Who Came Back," which is a splendid example of "keeping in the groove." It's every bit as good, although not as long, as "The Return of Circe."

Wilcox has "The Man From The Future," a "different" time story. Don says this is one of his better yarns, and we are inclined to agree.

David Wright O'Brien, who has been rather absent in past months, returns with "The Beauty And The Beasties," an unusual fantasy indeed.

Duncan Farnsworth presents "The Answer Man," which should have been in this issue, but was crowded out.

WE have received an interesting list from R. John Gruebner, 2306 N. 40th Street, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He gives us the best story in each issue since our first, July, 1939. Here they are. Maybe you have a list of your own? We'd be delighted to have your opinion too.

(VOL. 1) No. 1—The Invisible Robinhood; No. 2—The Monster From Nowhere; No. 3—The Amazing Invention Of Wilberforce Weems; No. 4—The Man From Hell. (VOL. 2) No. 1—Death Over Chicago; No. 2—New York Fights The Termanites; No. 3—The Little People; No. 4—Land Of Wooden Men; No. 5—The Whispering Gorilla; No. 6—Sabotage On Mars; No. 7—The Golden Princess; No. 8—Jongor Of Lost Land. (VOL. 3) No. 1—The Floating Robot; No. 2—Slaves Of The Fish Men; No. 3—Moons of Death; No. 4—Onslaught Of The Druid Girls; No. 5—Goddess Of Fire; No. 6—Secret League of Six.

YOU aviation fans, especially those interested in the future of what was once "sheer fantasy" in magazines like this, should certainly not miss the big September issue of *"Flying and Popular Aviation,"* which features a tremendous special "U. S. Army Air Forces" number. It's the most complete story of our Flying Army ever put together.

With that hot "inside" tip, we'll leave you for this month. *Rap.*

"Poor Al—if he takes off the gas mask, the atmosphere will get him. If he leaves it on . . ."

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TINK TAKES

by
William P. McGivern

Tink and Nastee were leprechauns: little Irish elves. Tink made people happy, Nastee made them miserable. So they made a bet . . . and the fun began

THE argument started on the corner of Forty-second and Broadway on a very hot morning in late August. Like many intense arguments it was precipitated by a chance remark.

Tinkle and Nastee were sprawled on top of the broad shoulders of the red-faced Irish cop who directed traffic at the intersection. They were sunning themselves lazily, paying little attention to the surging crowds and noisy trucks and cars.

Of course the Irish cop didn't know that his shoulders were serving as a resting place for Tink and Nastee. In fact he didn't even see them.

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A HAND...

Nastee scrambled down to the table and pushed mightily at the coffee cup.

For Tink and Nastee were Leprechauns, not quite the size of the Irish copper's index finger and quite invisible to human eyes. Forty-second Street was a favorite spot for them. They liked the noise and the bustle and the never-ending crowds of people. Practically every morning they climbed onto the top of a refuse can or the copper's shoulders and basked contentedly in the warm sun and the exciting street noises.

On this particular morning, the morning the argument started, Nastee turned on his side grumpily and said,

"I feel miserable. I feel terrible. Usually I can stand the sight of all these cheerful looking people going to work, but today it has got me down. I feel acutely, horribly unhappy."

Tinkle—Tink for short—chuckled. His laughter was a merry gusty bubble of gayety that tickled the Irish copper's ear.

"What's wrong with cheerful people?" he asked. "I like 'em. They make me feel fine, too. That's why I do what I can to make people happier. If you'd try that occasionally you'd feel the same way I do."

"Bah!" Nastee snorted. "I feel like a king when I'm making people unhappy. That's the only fun I get out of life these days."

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"That's why you have such little fun," Tink replied. "It's a hard job making people unhappy, because they've got too much sense to make themselves unhappy over unimportant things. I'll bet you couldn't get anyone in trouble if you tried."

"What?" Nastee cried eagerly. "You think I can't mess people up and make them unhappy any more?"

"Well," Tink hedged uneasily. "I didn't mean exactly that. But I will say it's easier to make people happy than it is to make them unhappy."

"I think you're crazy," Nastee said sourly. "If I want to cause trouble it's the simplest thing in the world. And nobody can stop me either."

"Causing trouble may be simple," Tink said, "when you don't have any opposition. But did you ever stop to think of what would happen if someone decided to spike your guns? Stopped your mischief before it did any harm?"

Nastee peered at Tink through his narrow little eyes.

"It wouldn't make any difference," he said flatly.

"I think it would," Tink said, just as flatly.

"Hummph," Nastee grunted.

"I say I think it would," Tink persisted. "In fact I'm willing to bet that if I had anything to say about the matter you wouldn't get to first base with your trouble making."

Nastee indulged in one of his rare, mirthless laughs.

"You're pretty cocky this morning, aren't you?" he said derisively. "If you're challenging me, you're on. We'll pick out one of these people going by here and make a real contest out of it. Just to show you how little worried I am, I'll let you have the first chance at whoever we pick."

"How long do we keep it up?" Tink asked gleefully.

"As long as you want," Nastee said sourly.

"Make it midnight tonight," Tink decided. "We'll both do what we can until then. At the stroke of twelve we both quit and decide who wins. All right?"

"Okay," Nastee agreed. "Now let's pick the victim."

For several minutes they eyed the swollen parade of people surging past the intersection, unable to make up their minds. Finally, however, Tink jumped to his feet and pointed to a tall, dark-haired young man standing indecisively on the curb.

"He looks interesting," he chirped. "Is he okay with you?"

Nastee surveyed the young man with a jaundiced eye. Finally he grunted and nodded his head.

"Okay," he muttered.

"Let's go then," Tink cried. "Don't forget I try my hand first on him."

With eyes dancing with merry excitement, Tink ran down the brass buttons on the officer's coat and leaped to the street in a graceful bound.

Jonathon Blake stood on the corner of Forty-second and Broadway wrestling with a rather interesting problem. He was trying to decide whether he should spend his last dollar and then leap into the Hudson River, or just step in front of a truck now and be done with it.

HE was a tall, dark-haired young man, and his serge suit could have doubled for a mirror any time, any place. He was a playwright. Ordinarily playwrights do not spend their time contemplating self-extinction. Only hungry playwrights who have been forcibly ejected from every manager's office on Broadway are subject to this peculiar form of mental doldrums.

Jonathon fitted into this last group

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and that was reason enough, it seemed to him, for stepping recklessly into the street into the path of a huge, rumbling van.

He actually did it without thinking. One instant he was pondering the problem and the next split second he was waiting for the inevitable and crushing impact of the heavy truck.

A horrible tortured squeal tore from brake drums and the truck came to a shuddering, jerky stop, bumper grazing the leg of Jonathon's trousers. It was a miraculous, almost incredible escape, and the milling pedestrians were breathlessly horrified.

Jonathon struggled through them as swiftly as he could and hurried down the street. Just his luck, he decided miserably. Couldn't even do a decent job of committing suicide. Every other bloke could, if he wanted, dispatch himself with neatness and vigor, but not Jonathon Blake. He strode dejectedly along, completely unaware of the two Leprechauns perched on his shoulder.

"First blood," Tink said jubilantly to the glowering Nastee. "I saved him from the truck. Now let's see what you can do."

"You'll see," Nastee promised grimly.

At Forty-first street Jonathon decided to have a cup of coffee. He might as well spend his dollar, he realized, before jumping into the river. He was no hoarder.

He entered a smart restaurant, catering to the show business crowd, and slumped into a seat next to a young girl. He didn't bother to look at her, just mumbled his order to the waitress and continued to think his gloomy thoughts.

When the coffee arrived, he reached for the cup, but before he could touch it, something jigged his elbow and the cup tipped its contents into the lap of the girl seated next to him.

She cried out instinctively, and then they were both on their feet and he was trying vainly to mop up the mess with his handkerchief. The waitress and the manager hurried over and Jonathon felt like an awkward, clumsy oaf, with ten thumbs.

"I'm terribly sorry," he said miserably, dabbing ineffectually at her skirt with his handkerchief. "Awfully clumsy of me."

"Yes, wasn't it?" the girl said frostily.

JONATHON took a good look at her then for the first time. The top of her smooth blonde head came up just even with his shoulder, and she was put together very neatly, with just the right curves in the right places. Her large blue eyes were frosted with anger now and there were twin spots of color in the creamy white of her cheeks.

Jonathon felt his spirits lifting at the sight of this girl. Suddenly it seemed awfully important that she didn't think him an impossible clown.

"Please," he said humbly, "I know I don't deserve it but won't you smile just once so I'll know you're not too angry with me."

The girl hesitated for an instant, and then she noticed Jonathon's clean, dark, good looks and wide shoulders. She smiled then. Not a big smile but just enough to let Jonathon know she wasn't really mad.

He sat down next to her feeling very happy and very reckless.

"Since I've messed up things so terribly," he said, "won't you let me buy breakfast?" He slipped his hand covertly into his pocket and reassured himself that the dollar was still there.

For a fraction of a second the girl deliberated. Then she smiled, a big smile this time.

"I think that would be very nice," she said gaily.

Breakfast while it lasted, was one of

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the most delightful meals he had ever eaten. They talked of everything and anything and time slipped by rapidly. Finally the girl glanced at her watch and sighed regretfully. Jonathon called for a check and reached for his dollar bill. It wasn't in the pocket he thought it was. He tried his other side pocket. It wasn't there. Something like panic crawled into his throat and stuck there.

Hurriedly he went through his other pockets. His vest, even his watch pocket he turned inside out. A cold clammy sweat broke out on his brow. What would she think? Naturally, that he was just some cheap cadger who was trying to sponge her for a meal. Or else just a blustering fourflusher. His heart began to pound against his ribs like a frightened bullfrog.

Tink and Nastee were sitting on the edge of the counter, swinging their legs.

"That's two in a row for you," Tink said. "First you knocked the cup over and now you've stolen his money."

Nastee grunted.

"The spilled coffee didn't work like it should have. I'll bet you had something to do with the way they got together so nice and chummy. She won't think much of him when he has to ask her to pay the check though."

Jonathon mopped his forehead nervously with his handkerchief.

"Is there anything wrong?" the girl asked quietly. There was the barest trace of frigidity in her voice.

"No, no," Jonathon lied. "Everything's just fine."

HE picked up the check and stood up. The walk to the cashier's desk was like the Last Mile. He thought desperately of dropping to the floor, and feigning unconsciousness or illness. But he didn't. He walked on like a zombie or a man going to a dentist. At the desk he fumbled uncertainly with the check until the cashier reached out and plucked it from his nerveless fingers.

This was the end. As he waited for her to total the check he thought bitterly of what he would do if he ever caught the pickpocket who had lifted his dollar.

The ringing of the cash register disrupted his murderous reverie. It didn't just ring once as the sale was recorded. It rang steadily and clangingly like a fire alarm. Jonathon looked at the girl anxiously.

She was smiling cheerfully as if it was nothing unusual for a well-behaved cash register to suddenly go off like an alarm clock.

"What's the matter?" he asked stupidly.

"Nothing," the girl answered, with a bright smile. She shoved his check back to him. It was stamped with a big gold star.

"You're the one-hundred-thousandth customer this year," she explained. "The meal is on us. Congratulations."

Jonathon felt a flood of sheer relief course through his body. His knees were filling with water and his head was getting light and dizzy. Luck like this was incredulous.

"Saved by the bell," he said fervently.

He turned and joined the girl who was waiting at the door. Now he could ask her name, ask her to let him see her again. Dizzying, delightful thoughts were churning through his head. He was going to lick this writing game, he knew. He also knew that when that happened he'd probably have a certain important question to ask this girl. That, he decided fleeingly, was the silliest thought of all. See a girl for a half hour and decide you're in love with her. Those things just didn't happen.

He took her by the arm and they went outside.

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Tink was dancing gleefully on Jonathon's shoulder.*

"Pretty neat," he chortled. "Pretty neat, wasn't it?"

Nastee barely grunted.

"You mean fixing that cash machine, I suppose," he said sulkily. He turned over and scowled. "I'm getting mad now."

"Do you think," Jonathon said to the girl when they reached the street, "that I'd be awfully out of place in asking you to let me see you again."

The girl smiled up at him.

"You don't even know my name," she said, "and yet you're anxious to see me again?"

"I know all I need to," Jonathon said seriously.

The girl's reply was completely obliterated by the sudden squealing of protesting brakes. A heavy truck had stopped suddenly before them blocking the traffic. Behind the truck a long sleek Cadillac honked its patrician horn impatiently.

Finally the owner of the Cadillac, a short, dynamic looking, florid fellow dressed in extremely loud sport clothes climbed wrathfully from the back seat of his car.

"I'll get a cab," he shouted angrily. "My time is my money and I am not a spendthrift. There ought to be a law against trucks anyway."

The man strode to the sidewalk and Jonathon, getting his first good look at him, felt his knees go suddenly weak. For this multi-colored, bellowing specimen of humanity was Max Swart, the biggest theatrical producer in the country. Jonathon had seen him before on several occasions as the fabled producer had swept past him in the outer reception rooms of his office and disappeared into the huge double doors that barricaded his own inner sanctum.

A nod of approval from Max Swart had made many of the biggest men and women in show business. But, needless to say, Max Swart did not make a habit of nodding at just anyone.

JONATHON watched him breathlessly as a very small boy might watch Babe Ruth or Jack Dempsey. The Great Man was walking toward them, he would pass right by them—BUT NO!!!

Jonathon almost fainted as Max Swart suddenly halted in his tracks, a big smile of welcome and recognition spreading over his face. Hands outstretched, the producer strode toward him eagerly. Jonathon knew his big chance had somehow miraculously arrived. It was possible that Max Swart remembered him from seeing him in his outer office, and now wanted to talk about one of the plays that he had written. Maybe he needed something for an immediate production, something like—Jonathon's dream train was derailed abruptly as the producer strode *past* him to the girl with whom he had breakfasted.

"Lola, Lola," he cried enthusiastically. "It's absolutely glorious to see you again. I have a play for you. Such a play, such a play, darling, as you have never read. There is not a second to lose. We'll go right to my office at once."

Jonathon felt as if a mule had kicked him in the stomach. He recognized the girl now. Lola Langtry, one of the year's sensational finds. God! what a chump he'd been. Buying her breakfast, making plans about her like any adolescent sophomore.

She turned to him.

* Irish folklore is full of beliefs about the "little people," both good and bad. Perhaps the most famous of them all are the leprechauns, who are said to be invisible, except to true Irishmen, and only to them on certain occasions. They are, insist the Irish, the "voice" we call conscience.—Ed.

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"Please understand, I have to leave now." She seemed to be waiting for him to say something but he remained silent.

"Come on!" Max Swart shouted. "My car is waiting." He shot a glance at Jonathon and then dragged Lola away by the arm. "Watch out who you talk to in this town," Jonathon heard him say as he helped the actress into the car.

A second later gears meshed and the long car shot away, a sleek shining symbol of money and power.

Tink shifted uneasily on Jonathon's shoulder and glanced at Nastee with new respect in his eye.

"Did you know that her big shot producer was coming along then?" he asked suspiciously. "If you did you're getting pretty good."

Nastee shrugged complacently.

"I'm pretty good all right," he smirked.

Jonathon stared after the powerful car bitterly. That was the way his luck ran. Get interested in a girl, build up a lot of silly ideas and then find out she's a top notch actress, sought after by famous producers, while he didn't have two coins to rub together. He'd never see her again, he knew. He didn't have any reason to. He jammed his hands into his pockets and started to move along, when a voice stopped him.

"Hey, Mister, your girl dropped this!"

Jonathon turned and saw one of the bus boys from the restaurant hurrying toward him. He held a small diamond clip in his hand.

"Found it under the stool where she was sitting," he explained importantly.

Jonathon closed his hand over the beautiful little clip and a smile touched his face. He'd see her once again anyway, if only to return the brooch.

Tink executed a little jig on the top of Jonathon's ear.

"He'll see her again," he said slyly to Nastee, "because I took the brooch from her pocketbook and planted it under the stool. It's not twelve o'clock yet, remember. A lot can happen to our friend here."

"A lot *is* going to happen," Nastee promised grimly.

JONATHON felt a growing elation about seeing Lola again. He was not deluding himself that he had a chance for her affections, but at least he could see her, say goodbye.

He phoned the Max Swart office at the first drug store, but the secretary told him Mr. Swart and Miss Langtry would not be in for several hours. Mr. Swart had phoned to that effect. Jonathon hung up and went for a walk in the park for two hours. He thought about winning the Pulitzer prize and Lola all in one swoop.

"Dreaming while wide awake," he muttered. "It's easy to do."

At the end of two hours he left the park and headed uptown for the offices of the Swart Production Agency. He was within two blocks of the building when it happened. Two detectives in plainclothes stepped alongside him and grabbed him by the arm.

"Take it easy," one of them said. "You won't get hurt."

The other ran his hands swiftly through Jonathon's pockets. His hand came out holding the slim diamond brooch.

"Where'd ya get this, chum?" he asked.

Jonathon swallowed. His mouth was suddenly dry.

"M—Miss Lola Langtry lost it and I was returning it to her," he said.

"That's good," one of the men said. "Real original story you got there. She lost it and you're just returning it. Well you'd better get a prettier tune than

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that to sing to the judge. You'll need it."

"Now just a minute," Jonathon said angrily. "You fellows are jumping to conclusions. Why don't you get in touch with Miss Langtry and see what she has to say?"

"We don't have to. She got in touch with us. Sent out the alarm with your description over an hour ago. Come on—"

TINK and Nastee were climbing up and down the bars of Jonathon's cell some hours later. Jonathon was slumped on the cot, his head buried in his hands, his shoulders slumped despairingly.

Tink looked worried.

"Time's passing," Nastee reminded him for the third time. "I got him sewed up now and there isn't much you can do."

"I wish I knew how you framed him for that theft," Tink said suspiciously. "You probably used the old hackneyed trick of whispering to the girl and making her believe she's figuring everything out for herself.

"It may be old," Nastee said smugly, "but these humans have gone for it so long now that there's no reason to change. They call it association of ideas or mental telepathy. Anyway that doesn't alter the fact that you're behind the eight ball and so is he. I'm waiting to see you get out of it."

Tink sighed.

"He's the one to worry about. Not me."

It was about a half-hour after that when the reporters arrived. A jewel theft was always good news, but when it had a tie-in with the season's most glamorous ingenue, it became really hot.

They fired a thousand questions at him through the bars:

"Are you in love with Lola Langtry?"

"Were you working alone on the job?"

"Did she scream when you jerked the brooch from her?"

Jonathon answered the questions patiently, as carefully as he could. Finally they trooped off. That is, all but one. A lean gray news hound whom Jonathon had seen a few times before about town stuck behind.

"My name is Lafferty," he said. "You've done some writing haven't you? Play or something wasn't it?"

Jonathon nodded, pleased in spite of himself that anyone should know of that.

"You aren't the guilty party in this thing are you?" Lafferty asked casually.

"No," Jonathon said wearily. "I'm not. But nobody listens to me."

"They will," Lafferty said. "This little masquerade is about over."

Nastee watched the reporter leave with a troubled look in his eye.

"Something's up, Tink," he said positively. "What do you know about it?"

Tink swung gracefully from one bar to another like a trapeze artist.

"You'll see," he said coyly, "you'll see."

THE day dragged by and night settled over the city. At eleven o'clock the warden opened the door to Jonathon's cell.

"Your bail has just been taken care of," he said.

"By whom?" Jonathon asked.

"Max Swart. He also wants to see you as soon as you can make it from here to his place. He sent his car here and it's waiting for you."

Jonathon left in such a hurry that Tink and Nastee barely had time to rub the sleep out of their eyes and leap to their accustomed spot on his shoulder. On the trip through the city in Max Swart's smooth car Jonathon racked his

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brain for an answer to the puzzle of Max Swart's interest in him. But nothing he arrived at made sense so he gave up.

When he reached the duplex apartment where Swart lived he was whisked to the penthouse in a waiting elevator and led into the Swart apartment by an obsequious butler. Through heavily carpeted corridors and finally to the library. The butler threw wide the double doors of oak and Jonathon was on his own.

Seated behind a huge desk in the center of the room was Max Swart. Jonathon entered the room and saw that Lola was seated in an overstuffed chair in the corner and Lafferty, the newshound, was leaning against the wall.

"My boy," Max cried jovially, "Welcome to the shack."

"Lemme talk," Lafferty said bluntly. "Something stinks about this whole deal and that's why I got you together. In the first place Swart I think the robbery was phoney, a press agent's gag. This lad didn't take the brooch, in fact nobody took it, but you wanted the public to think this particular person did take it."

Swart shrugged good-naturedly.

"Why would I want to do that?"

"Because this young guy is a playwright. You figure that if the public gets interested in this guy as a thief, it'll be good publicity when you buy a play from him and star Lola Langtry in it, the gal whom he robbed."

SWART stood up and rubbed his hands excitedly. He paced back and forth behind his desk like an overweight panther.

"It's terrific!" he cried suddenly. "It's got everything. We'll do it. What do we care if he's a thief? All writers are anyway. Instead of jewels he can steal scenes and dialogue from now on, only its respectable."

"I'm not a jewel thief," Jonathon snapped irritably.

Lafferty swallowed incredulously.

"You mean you didn't have this cooked up already?" he demanded of Swart.

"No," Swart said expansively, "We missed a bet on that, but thanks to you we can capitalize on the publicity yet. We'll all make barrels of money," he paused and glanced meaningly at Lafferty. "You understand, of course, that I mean we will *all* make barrels of money."

Lafferty nodded and smiled.

"I get you. I'll forget all about tonight and pretend I was bowling instead."

Swart picked up Lola's diamond brooch from his desk and walked to the mantle and placed it in a wall safe.

"Then the whole thing's settled," he boomed. "Even to keeping the diamond brooch that started the whole business here in my wall safe tonight."

"Mr. Swart," Jonathon said, "if you want me to write plays for you—fine. About working with Miss Langtry though I can't say. That's up to her."

Max Swart looked at Lola and saw the delightful blush which stained her cheeks and the shy smile that fluttered over her lips.

"I think everything will be all right on that angle," he said drily.

Tink did a little jig step and slapped Nastee on the back almost knocking him over.

"I win," he chortled. "I win. Everything's perfectly happy. The guy got out of jail and got a job, and unless I'm way wrong he'll get the girl too."

"I've still got five minutes," Nastee snarled peevishly. "My time isn't up and I've got an idea that'll put him right back where he started. I'm going to cop the brooch again and plant it on

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him. When they find it a second time, he'll be through for good."

"You're repeating yourself, you know," Tink said scornfully.

"There's no law against that," Nastee retorted.

He ran across the floor and up the wall. Tink followed him dolefully. He saw Nastee walk across the mantle and climb into the interior of the wall safe. Then he chuckled.

Stepping across the floor, he slammed the door to the wall safe and twirled the combination handle.

Tink's mouth was parted in a wide grin. That'd hold Nastee.

He crawled up and took a seat before the wall safe. He'd let him out after midnight, but not a second before.

Nastee would be furious at being tricked but it was his own fault. Tink could picture him now, red-faced and impotent, tramping up and down inside the safe, probably swearing like a trooper. He wouldn't be fit to live with for weeks after he let him out.

Tink didn't care. He looked down at the happiness he had created and his tiny, tinkling laugh bubbled from his throat, contented and happy.

Lola looked up at Jonathon and smiled at him.

"Funny," she said, "but I thought I heard someone laugh."

"It was probably my heart," Jonathon said.

THE SCIENCE OF WASTE

IN these days of National Defense and the proximity of some dangerous shortages in things needed to keep that defense at top peak, it might be interesting to know that all of us who own or operate an automobile can use a little scientific and common sense which will lead to a national conservation of gasoline.

It has been estimated that fifty percent of all motorists utterly waste exactly one half of the gasoline they pour into the tanks of their cars. And the majority of these people are the ones who do the most complaining about the poor mileage they're getting.

One of the chief causes in waste of gasoline is the common mistake made by most motorists when wanting to make a quick start or getaway. Nine times out of ten these drivers jam the throttle down to the floor, thus flooding the engine with much more gasoline than is actually needed for a maximum of power. You can get just as much speed, and almost no waste, in your pickup, by keeping the accelerator at half throttle.

Speeding as fast as you can while the car is in low gear is still another common fallacy and gasoline waster. By shifting into second at ten miles an hour, and third at twenty-five, you can save fifty cubic centimeters of gas in one start.

A third cardinal waste of gas occurs, believe it or not, in excessive speeds through heavy traffic. In your efforts to claw a path through a crowded road, while barrelling along at top speed, you are forced to use your brakes much more than you actually realize. (Count the brake uses sometime!) This constant dependency on brakes defeats the purpose of your speed by slowing you down to a rate that actually causes you to *lose* time, and the gasoline waste in having to pick up to high speed time and time again is tremendous.

And finally, another great gas waster is the stupid habit of racing the motor while standing still. This might make your ancient jallopy sound like Malcolm Campbell's Bluebird, but, brother, it's one of the greatest gas eaters. All in all, by remembering some of these points the next time you drive, you can do your part toward saving the gasoline supply for Uncle Sam and National Defense—plus giving yourself a break by saving half of your gasoline bills!

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THE PERFECT

by P. F. COSTELLO

Nothing could have been better to hide in than this weird castle far off the highway

THE heavy black touring car slewed to a stop before a roadside gasoline station, and a small man with dark hair and eyes climbed out. He looked cautiously about and then opened the screen door and stepped into the wooden shack erected behind the gas pumps.

"Got the late papers?" he growled to the overalled youth who rose from a chair and looked inquiringly at him.

"Yeah," the kid answered.

The dark haired man fidgeted impatiently as the attendant gave him the paper and made change for the dollar bill he handed him.

"Didja hear anything about the big bank robbery in the next town?" the kid asked, handing him his change.

For a second a tight white line circled the customer's mouth, and then he grinned thinly.

"Not a thing," he answered.

"The way I got it doped," the kid said importantly, "them bandits are hundreds of miles away by this time."

"Stick 'em up, funny guy," snarled the bandit. "And don't try to pull nothin'!"

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HIDEOUT

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The thin grin spread.

"Maybe," the dark haired man answered. Then he turned and left. Seconds later the car roared away down the road.

"Gabby kid back there," Blackie Nolan said over the smooth humming roar of the car. "Had a lot of ideas about a certain bank robbery."

His companion, Sledge Scarpetti, let his breath out harshly.

"Was he suspicious?" he asked quickly.

"Nah," Blackie said, "just a gabby punk." He spread the paper out in his lap. "Let's see what kind of reviews we got this time." He read aloud: "Daring bandits rob Mid-western bank. Another daylight robbery shocked the citizens of this town as two armed thugs held up the Citizens Bank and escaped with notes and currency valued at fifty-five thousand dollars. Police report that they are working on an inside tip and are expecting an arrest within twenty-four hours."

Blackie made a snorting noise and tossed the paper out of the car. "Whadda they mean calling us thugs?" he asked plaintively.

Sledge Scarpetti laughed without mirth. He was a tall, thin man with a narrow, evil face and hot, deep-brown eyes. There was something predatory in the hook of his nose and in the talon-like clutch of his bony hands on the steering wheel.

"For fifty thousand bucks, it won't matter," he said.

"Fifty-*five* thousand," Blackie corrected softly.

SLEDGE didn't answer. They drove on in silence for a while.

"We're in a kind of a tight spot y'know. If these coppers get smart and find out where we switched cars we're in for it."

Blackie looked over his shoulder.

"Everything's clear," he grunted. "but you'd better step on it. We can't get too far too fast to suit me."

The powerful super-charged car began to pick up speed immediately. The road and the trees flankling it flashed past them at a dizzying pace. The steady hum of the motor crescendoed to a roaring drone.

Blackie loosened his collar slightly.

"Take it easy," he warned, "I didn't mean for you to cut loose."

Sledge grinned tightly.

"I'm all right," he said. "I could handle this buggy with my eyes shut."

The speedometer needle continued to creep forward. It hovered for an instant at 75, and then moved inexorably to 80-85. The road stretched ahead of them like a shining black ribbon. The throbbing laboring sound of the motor was a clamoring din that pounded painfully against their ears. Blackie opened his mouth to shout something, but suddenly his eyes dilated with horror.

"Sledge!" he screamed wildly, "there's a detour sign—"

The sentence was never completed. It was drowned out in the tortured, protesting screech of the brakes as Sledge fought futilely with the careening car. He twisted the wheel frantically to avoid the unpaved rutted road and the car plowed through the shoulder and plunged into the ravine that flanked it.

Trees snapped like match sticks and shrubs and brushes were rooted up as the two-ton car dug its snout into the floor of the valley. The rasping, hideous sounds of crackling, straining metal ceased as the car turned turtle and flopped on its back like a battered animal. It was in a quiet hidden glen and soon everything was quiet again.

BLACKIE NOLAN opened his eyes cautiously. It was dark every-

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where he looked and as he crawled cautiously to a sitting position his body ached and creaked horribly. Rain was falling, a heavy oppressive rain that had already soaked him to the skin. A rumble of thunder drifted to him on the wind and then the scene was illuminated by a brilliant jagged flash of lightning.

He saw the battered car resting on its top. He didn't seem to be badly hurt. Just dazed and shaken up quite a bit. He climbed groggily to his feet. His shoes squished with each step and his clothes clung uncomfortably to his body. He groped his way toward the car, but after a few steps, collided with a recumbent figure and almost sprawled to the ground.

"Watch where you're goin'," a voice snarled at his feet.

"Sledge!" Blackie cried unbelievingly. "Are you all right, too? It just don't seem possible."

Another fork of lightning split the black heavens and Blackie saw Sledge in its glare, sitting on the ground, miserable looking and cold, but otherwise quite all right.

Sledge straightened his lean length and crawled to his feet. "I feel like I've been put through a wringer with spikes in it, but other than that I'm okay," he said weakly.

Blackie looked apprehensively about.

"We're in a sweet spot now," he muttered. "We might as well give ourselves up as try and make town now. On foot we'd be picked up in no time at all."

Sledge was feeling his arms and legs experimentally.

"I still can't get over bein' in one piece," he said dazedly. "I was doing eighty-five, at the least, when we went off the road."

"Well," Blackie snapped, "it isn't your fault that we both ain't lying in that car spread around like mashed potatoes. I told you to slow down, but you gotta do things your way. Now we gotta do some real thinking to get ourselves out of this jam."

A blinding flash of lightning exploded as he finished speaking and before its brilliant illumination faded, Sledge grabbed his arm excitedly.

"I seen a house," he said breathlessly. "A big joint, more like a castle than a house, straight off through them trees. All stone and towers like them castles in the movies. Who'd ever be screwy enough to build a dump like that out in this wilderness?"

Blackie didn't answer for a minute. His dark brow was wrinkled over his beady eyes. He was silent until the next lightning flash and then he peered tensely in the direction of Sledge's pointing finger.

"You're right as hell," he snapped. "I saw it myself. Maybe this is the break we've been needing. In a lonely, out-of-the-way dump like this we could hold up till the heat's off. Ever think of that?"

Sledge whistled admiringly. "It might work, at that," he said slowly. "We've got gats enough to hold off an army if we was trailed here."

"We got to chance it," Blackie said decisively. "Come on."

He led the way to the car and got down on his hands and knees to wrench at the twisted door. He worked silently and furiously for a minute or so and then he stood up weakly.

"It's no go," he panted. "We'll have to leave the stuff until we can come back here with an acetylene torch. The first thing we got to do is get out of this rain and get some dry clothes. A meal and a hot bath wouldn't be hard to take, either."

Sledge looked helplessly at the twisted steel body of the car and shrugged his shoulders.

"Let's go," he said.

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BY the time they sloshed through the ankle-deep water and mud that covered the floor of the ravine, they were almost completely plastered with mud and water. The storm was increasing in intensity. The rain was driving at them in cold, needlelike streams; the rumbling detonations of thunder and the eye-searing brilliance of lightning were following each other without pause. They had taken a twisted, winding trail that seemed to be leading them to their goal. Blackie paused at the top of a knoll and looked back in perplexity.

Sledge stopped and asked,

"How're we goin' to find our way back to the car?"

Blackie scratched his damp head.

"You got me," he said.

There was nothing else to do so they went on. After an interminable, miserable hour of weary plodding they emerged from the forest onto a plain upon which the strange castle was built. It was a mammoth structure, made of huge blocks of stone and peaked with dozens of towers of all sizes and heights. Lights were burning from several windows and this dispelled, to some extent, the foreboding air of the place.

"Barnum was right," Blackie said disgustedly. "What kind of a sucker do you suppose we'll find here. Any guy who'd spend the dough to build a dump like this out a million miles from nowhere must need a straight jacket. Come on."

They trudged wearily across the cleared plain to the front of the castle. The storm was pounding them now with all of its wild fury and a white mist was rolling over the floor of the valley blotting from sight completely the forest they had just left.

A stone walk led to the front door and up this Blackie and Sledge walked cautiously. Blackie slipped his hand in his pocket and he felt his courage flooding back as his hand nestled over the comforting hardness of his automatic. Ten feet from the heavy oak-beamed door he stopped abruptly.

The door was opening slowly, a band of light was spreading on the ground before them.

"What's the gag?" Sledge whispered tensely.

The door swung all the way back and a man's form appeared, silhouetted against the light. It was the form of a medium-sized man with stooped shoulders and a hesitant, diffident manner. It was not possible to see his face.

"Won't you come in?" he asked politely. "We have been expecting you."

Blackie looked at him suspiciously.

"Whadda you mean you been expecting us!"

"On nights like this," the man in the doorway said quietly, "we are often a haven of refuge to unfortunate travelers."

The man backed slightly as he spoke and it was possible to see his face. It was an impassive face, lined somewhat, with large eyes and a medium-sized mouth. It was not at all consistent, Blackie decided, with the mysterious air of the place.

"We'd be obliged," he said haltingly, "if you could put us up for the night and maybe toss out a little grub for us."

The man in the doorway—evidently a servant—smiled. "I'm sure that can be arranged. Please come in."

BLACKIE looked at Sledge and nodded approval. They entered the house, but before the door closed behind them, Blackie noticed that the white mist had rolled across the plain and seemed to be enveloping the house itself. Then the door clicked shut and they were standing in the foyer of the castle.

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"Follow me, please," the butler said. "We have a fire in the next room. I'm sure that you will be comfortable."

Blackie and Sledge peered about like dogs in a strange yard, and then they followed the butler. He led them to a large, sumptuously appointed room, where a huge roaring fire was casting a welcome heat throughout the room.

"I will have dinner sent in," the butler informed them, "and in the meantime you can change your damp clothes. I'll bring something suitable. For the immediate present let me offer you something in the nature of a liquid stimulant."

"Now you're talking turkey," Blackie chortled.

The butler poured them drinks from a decanter on a table before the fire. Then he left them.

The bank robbers gulped their drinks appreciatively. Blackie refilled his glass and sank into a comfortable chair and extended his feet to the fire.

"This is more like it," he sighed gratefully. "We've just fallen into a barrel of luck. An-out-of-the-way place with all the comforts of home." His eyes traveled appraisingly over the heavy drapes, the luxurious furniture, the teakwood tables. A thoughtful look stole over his face. "Might be a good idea to find out where all the mazuma for this stuff comes from," he muttered.

They lounged, then, without speaking, before the fire, letting its warmth flood their chilled bodies. They poured themselves several more drinks and then the butler reappeared, pushing a coffee table before him. The table was loaded with steaming dishes and bottles of fragrant wines. Without a word he prepared a place at the table for them. Gold knives and forks were arranged beside paper-thin china plates. Gleaming white napkins and crystal clear goblets completed the service.

Blackie and Sledge were too famished to marvel at the perfection of the table appointments. They uncovered the glistening silver bowls and went to work. It was delicious food, but most of it was strange to them. They ate, in an almost savage silence, until they collapsed against the cushioned backs of their chairs, too stuffed to move.

"Boy!" Blackie ejaculated. "That was a real grunter. I feel like sleeping for a week."

"Your rooms are ready, gentlemen," the butler said quietly. "If you are tired I will show you the way. The Master will receive you tomorrow. He has instructed me to tell you that everything here is at your disposal. He hopes you will enjoy your stay."

Blackie stood up.

"That's right nice of him," he said. "Who the devil is this boss of yours anyway?"

"I can't say, Sir," the butler said imperturbably. "Will you follow me, please." He turned and moved toward the door.

Blackie shrugged. He patted the gun in his breast pocket and winked to Sledge.

"As long as we're heeled, we got nothin' to worry about."

"I dunno," Sledge said dubiously. "Everything seems kind of funny. I wish it would stop raining and thundering for a while. It gets on my nerves."

Blackie laughed. "Don't look gift horses in the mouth, me old man used to say. We got a perfect hideout and you're worrying about a storm that'll keep the coppers away like nothin' else could. This is about the best break we've had since we've been in the business."

HE turned, and with Sledge at his heels, followed the butler out of the room. The servant led them down a

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wide, high-arched hall. The floor was of blue-veined marble, and thick gold tapestries shrouded the walls. Chandeliers, gleaming with thousands of lights, it seemed, poured sun-bright illumination into the corridor. Blackie and Sledge walked slowly, peering frequently over their shoulders at the luxurious wonders they were passing. At the end of the block-long corridor two mighty doors swung slowly open at their approach.

Blackie stared incredulously at the door, and then grabbed Sledge by the arm.

"Look at them doors," he hissed. "If they ain't damn near solid gold I'll eat a doorknob."

Sledge stared at them and nodded slowly. The breath left his body in a single hissing stream. He tried to speak and couldn't.

They passed through the arch of the door into a large court, in the middle of which an elaborate fountain was playing. Brilliantly colored trees and shrubbery grew in orderly profusion about this magnificent display.

Blackie and Sledge looked at each other in silence. On their faces were stamped ludicrous expressions of bewilderment. Looking up, they could see the ceiling, apparently hundreds of feet above their heads. It seemed to be composed of some sort of translucent marble that moved and undulated before their eyes. It gave a surprisingly realistic impression of clouds in motion.

In dazed silence they followed their guide through the huge court, and into another corridor, identical to the one they had just passed through. Everywhere they looked, the evidences of wealth and riches met their eyes. Silks, jewels, gold, were lavishly used in the decorations of these mighty rooms through which they were passing.

At last the butler stopped and opened a smaller door leading from the main corridor. He stood aside and motioned them to enter.

"These are your rooms," he said suavely. "I am sure you will find everything you need. Good night."

He closed the door behind them and they peered about in wonder. Two wide, satin-covered beds occupied the middle of the room. They shuffled over the thick pile of an oriental rug and peered into the lavatories. Blackie whistled in wonder.

"Sunken tubs," he whispered in awe. His eyes traveled greedily over gold faucets and marble walls, inset with brilliant mirrors. "What a joint!"

But even the splendor of these appointments could not keep their eyes open. Blackie yawned.

"I'm turning in," he said sleepily.

Sledge nodded dully in agreement and they threw themselves on the soft, pillowed beds. Almost at the same instant the lights in their apartment dimmed to a faint, comfortable glow.

"That's real service," Blackie yawned. The last thing he remembered was a drowsy realization that the electric storm was still raging outside this strange castle.

BLACKIE was awakened from his dreamless sleep by a rough, excited hand shaking his shoulder. He opened his eyes groggily and saw Sledge standing over him. Even in his sleep-drugged condition he could see that Sledge was hipped up. His face was flushed a dull red and his loose lips were working spasmodically.

"What'sa matter?" he muttered sleepily.

"Plenty," Sledge snapped. "That storm ain't let up a minute since we went to bed. Now look at this." He crossed to the wall and flung back a tapestry, revealing a high window.

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Blackie blinked as another fork of lightning split the skies. It was still storming and thundering, he could see. He turned an exasperated face to Sledge.

"Go back to sleep," he said irritably. "You goin' batty, waking a guy up in the middle of the night to show a rain storm. Forget it. Tomorrow morning everything'll be okay."

"It *is* morning," Sledge said flatly. "My watch says ten o'clock. It's still dark because of the storm. But that ain't what I woke you up for. Come over here and look out."

Blackie climbed out of bed, muttering to himself. He padded to Sledge's side and peered out the window. The mist that he had noticed the day before was still swirling through the air. Through it he could see water, green, cold-looking water lapping against the sides of the castle. His eyes opened in astonishment.

"W-why," he gasped, "we're in the middle of a flood."

"You catch on quick," Sledge observed drily. "That's what I woke you up for. Whata we goin' to do now."

Blackie frowned a minute and then his face cleared and he smiled.

"Nothin'," he drawled. "What could be sweeter? Safe from snoopy coppers in the perfect hideout. We can lay up here until the heat's off. In the meantime I got ideas about all this stuff." His hand indicated the lavish furnishings of the room.

Sledges' eyes narrowed and he grinned evilly.

"I wondered how long it would take you to think of that. It'd make a nice haul."

"We gotta take it easy," Blackie cautioned, "until we meet the Boss of this place and find out what kind of a show he's running."

Sledge opened his mouth, but Blackie motioned him to silence. The door was opening and their impassive servant was entering.

"Good morning," he said. "I trust you slept well."

He stepped into the room and clapped his hands. A second later four comely, attractive girls entered the room. They were dressed in simple white robes that did not detract from their charming femininity in the least. Over their arms they carried freshly pressed suits, shirts, shoes, even underwear. They spread them on the beds and one of them left and returned in a minute with a tray.

"Breakfast," the butler explained unnecessarily. "After you have dined and bathed and clothed yourself the Master will see you."

The girls left the room and Sledge whistled happily.

"All the comforts of home is right." he murmured.

Blackie winked at the butler. "Tell the boss we ain't got a squawk in the world."

"He'll be pleased to hear that," the butler murmured. Then he backed from the room.

Blackie stretched luxuriously. There was a complacent, satisfied smirk on his face. He glanced from the steaming trays of savory foods to the new, expensive clothes which had been brought to them.

"Draw my bath, Jeeves," he said smirking, "and don't forget the bath salts."

AN hour later Blackie and Sledge finished their breakfasts with a contented sigh. Clad impeccably in well-fitting clothes, and glorying in a luxurious sense of well-being, they lit cigarettes and relaxed in cushioned chairs.

Blackie looked lazily at the window. The storm was still roaring, unabated. He grinned slowly.

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"That's just fine. I hope that this rain just keeps coming," he said languidly.

"Do you like storms?" a smooth voice asked behind them.

Blackie and Sledge turned to the doorway. Standing there was a slim young man dressed in dark clothes. He was smiling faintly. A thick black mustache twisted upwards with his slight smile. It was impossible to tell the color of his eyes for they were nothing but shadowy caverns in his face. Still smiling, he walked toward them with lithe grace.

"Allow me to welcome you," he said easily. "I'm very sorry that I haven't been able to see you before this."

"Well that's all right," Blackie said magnanimously. "We haven't suffered any. Your butler has taken care of us fine."

"If you need anything," the young man smiled, "just let him know. I've instructed him to take the best care of you gentlemen. I'm confident that you won't want for anything."

"You know we're flooded in, don't you?" Sledge asked. "How soon will it be before the water gets down far enough for us to get out of here?"

The young man smiled apologetically.

"This is a very rainy country," he said regretfully. "But we shall try and make things pleasant for you."

"Could we get a radio?" Blackie asked.

The young man pointed to a small compact radio on a corner table.

"I think this is working," he said, moving toward it. He flicked it on and almost immediately an announcer's voice boomed into the room:

"Late flash. There is still no news of the bandits who robbed the midwestern bank in a daring day-time raid. Police, however, are promising speedy results."

The young man switched off the radio.

"Was that the news you wanted?" he asked smiling.

"You're wise, eh?" Blackie rasped. His hand dug into his pocket and reappeared holding a black automatic. He covered the young man and stepped to the door and closed it. "Frisk him, Sledge," he said tersely.

Sledge went through the smiling young man's pockets with expert swiftness. He found nothing but a thickly stuffed leather wallet. He peered into it and his mouth dropped open in stupefied astonishment.

"It's crammed with grand notes," he whispered hoarsely.

"Freeze onto it," Blackie ordered. His eyes swung to the young man. "You must have a sweet racket," he said with begrudging admiration, "but don't underestimate us, Junior. We're tough and if you think I'm afraid to use this gat just make a play."

THE young man held up a hand protestingly.

"Believe me," he smiled, "I have no use for violence. If the money pleases you then keep it. Anything else you like is yours for the asking."

"That ain't natural," Blackie growled. "Something's screwy. I'm goin' to keep my eye on you, fancy britches." He slipped the gun back into his pocket. "You can scram now. And don't forget I'm running this show from now on. When this storm lets up we're clearing out. And all we can carry is goin' with us. In fact I'll make contact with the mob and bring trucks in here and strip this joint bare."

"Tell him," Sledge said, "to send some men up here. We can put 'em to work loading things that we want to take near the door."

The young man continued to smile.

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"I'll see to that," he murmured. "The place is yours to command, remember that. I may not see you for a while, because I have so many things to attend to. I always like to greet new arrivals personally, however. Good-bye."

He stepped to the door, and a very peculiar thing happened. Before the door completely opened the smiling young man vanished.

Blackie blinked his eyes.

"Whaddaya know?" he gasped. "He must of done that with mirrors."

Before Sledge could comment the door opened abruptly and four burly, impassive men strode into the room.

Blackie sprang back, jerking his revolver.

"Hold it!" he snapped. "What's the idea of barging in like this? You're talking to the new boss of this dump and make no mistakes. If you guys play it square I'll take care of you. Cross me and I'll rub you out without blinking an eye. I'm the toughest guy in New York's underworld, Blackie Nolan. You've probably heard of me. Hard as nails, but square. Remember that."

The four men stood still, listening attentively to him. There was a blended expression of deference and indifference stamped on their faces.

"A'right," Blackie snapped. His gun waved menacingly. "What's the business? Are you with Blackie or not on this deal?"

One of the men cleared his throat.

"I don't know about that, but we've been told to obey your slightest command and that's what we're here for. What would you like us to do?"

Blackie grinned broadly and grinned at Sledge.

"Just a natural born leader, that's me. We're taking over from this minute on. With these guys as a start we'll build up the toughest mob in the country with the dough we can raise here. And make no mistake about it. The kid with the smile is going to be out of his business, whatever it is, when we get settin' right in the saddle. Now let's put these lugs to work."

Sledge nodded.

"Now get this right," he snapped to the four men. "Do as you're told and don't take no orders from nobody but me and Blackie. Go through this dump from one end of it to the other and don't leave nothing behind you. Rugs, draperies, gold, jewels, money, anything that we can turn into cash. Bring it all to the front door of this joint and stack it there. This is clean-up week and we ain't leaving a thing. Get it? Now hop to it."

The four men left in silence. Sledge grinned mirthlessly.

"We got 'em bluffed. The thing to do now is keep 'em that way."

THE storm continued the remainder of the day, but the two gangsters were too elated and busy to notice. Supervising the stripping of this castle of treasures was a most engrossing task.

Gold doorknobs and faucets were broken off and carried to the main courtyard and stacked in piles in the corner. Tapestries were torn from the walls and piled on top of them. There were more magnificent rooms in the castle than they could count. Expensive furniture was added to the loot, but their crowning delight came when they found chest after chest in storerooms loaded with pure gold. Other rooms yielded chests of precious stones and intricately wrought jewelry.

"I tell you we're millionaires," Blackie hissed for the dozenth time. "There's enough loot here for an army. When we get back to Broadway, spending this stuff, will be a real pleasure.

Sledge licked his lips greedily.

"It's gettin' hard to wait," he said

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anxiously. "With all of this junk lying right in front of you, it makes you want to act crazy."

The vast inner courtyard was piled high with unimaginable wealth and treasures by dinner time. They stopped just long enough to bolt food into their mouths and then they were back at their task like a pair of human pack rats. For the rest of the day they worked strenuously. The four men who were helping them worked equally hard, but silently.

When their stomachs told them another day was drawing to a close they ordered dinner brought to the courtyard where their treasures were stored.

"I ain't leaving this stuff," Blackie said flatly. "I'm going to sleep here and eat here until this flood lets up."

They spent the night, surrounded by hoards of wealth, on beds which had been brought from other rooms. The next morning Blackie woke suddenly from a sound sleep. For a second he peered dazedly around him, and then he sprang from his bed. A vast sigh of relief escaped him when he saw the accumulated loot still piled high about the walls of the room.

He hurried to a window and cursed dejectedly. Rain* was still falling and vivid streaks of white lightning were still lancing the heavens. The water still lapped warningly against the base of the castle. From the horizon the heavy white mist continued to roll forward, obscuring visibility within fifty or sixty feet of the castle.

WITH a disgusted sigh, Blackie turned back to their treasures. The sight of them revived his drooping spirits. The visions of what they would buy, of what they would do for him was sufficient to rekindle his enthusiasm.

Sledge was sitting up, rubbing his eyes.

"Still raining?" he asked bitterly.

The familiar butler entered before Blackie had an opportunity to answer.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he said with mechanical cordiality. "I will make arrangements today to have your complete living quarters transferred to this court, if you wish. In that way you will be close to your—ah—treasures."

Blackie was studying the man as he spoke.

"Look," he said suddenly, "you've been okay with us and we're willing to play ball. How'd you like a cut on the take? All you've got to do is give some dope on what your boss' racket is."

"Very kind of you," the butler bowed slightly. "I understand that the Master is something of a collector. Beyond that I couldn't say."

"Okay," Blackie snapped irritably. "What about this rain?"

"Does it bother you?"

"Certainly it does!" Blackie yelled. "Are you kidding me?"

"Unfortunate," the butler muttered. "It takes a little time to get accustomed to it. I'll have breakfast brought in directly."

He turned and walked purposefully from the room.

"I'm beginning to get the picture," Blackie said thoughtfully. "The Boss

* Searching far back into the dim reaches of superstition and time we are unable to determine just why futility and frustration are usually manifested in concrete form by thick mist, or fog, and constant rain. It is possible that it is a result of the early days of man, when the Earth was a steaming jungle, and rain was the rule, and fog was ever present, especially in the dank depths of the forest. Or we might even go further back in evolution than that, and decide that the lizards from which we sprang, never saw the sun.

Be that as it may, men today are depressed by fog and mist and rain, and the forced inactivity it brings to children causes a depression that isn't entirely due to resentment at not being able to go out and play, but to a fear of the unknown that is retained from the dawn of history when fog meant danger roving abroad, and meant staying in the cave for safety.—Ed.

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here must be sort of a big shot in some cult or other. That's how he's got all these stiff-legged zombies working for him. It's a honey of a racket, just waiting for a real organizer to come along and take over. I'm goin' to start propositioning these boys, but tough. I ain't taking anything but 'yes' for an answer."

Sledge was slipping into his coat.

"I'm going to keep right on what I was doing yesterday. I can't think of a more pleasant way to spend the day."

They breakfasted and went to work. Every room they explored led them to new riches and treasures until their heads swam at the value of the wealth they were collecting. There was nothing, not even a trivial physical discomfort, to mar their pulse-quickening treasure hunt. There were rich, toothsome foods, delightfully fragrant wines and soft couches and every conceivable luxury to cater to their physical needs, and there was the thrill of the hunt and the anticipation of spending their amassed wealth to act as a mental spur.

The day passed quickly. Another day passed and then a week slipped by. The men fell unconsciously into a routine. Breakfast and cigarettes. Treasure hunt and lunch. Nap and cocktails and more treasure hunt and finally dinner and then bed. They said little to each other now. There wasn't anything to say. They had stopped discussing the never-ending storm. A mute glance at the window upon arising was all the apparent attention they paid to it.

WEEKS faded into a month. Both men were becoming nervous, irritable.

Blackie spent part of each day at a window, cursing softly beneath his breath. The vast courtyard was almost filled with bundles of booty and treasure. Sledge itemized it all on paper and tried to figure its approximate worth. The amount—though only a guess—was staggering. It fired their imaginations anew, rekindled their dampening enthusiasm.

"If we could only get away from this place," Blackie cried suddenly, "we'd be kings. This stuff lying around loose like this is driving me nutty." His face hardened suddenly. "I'm going to take a crack at it," he said grimly. "That water might not be high and I might be able to get to the road."

Fired with the prospect of immediate action, he yelled for the butler at the top of his voice. His whole body seemed to be tingling, as if an electric wave of hope were coursing through him. His irritability disappeared. His good spirits returned.

"Won't be long now," he said cheerfully. When the butler appeared, he told him what he wanted.

Minutes later he was climbing into hip-high boots, and buttoning a waterproof slicker about him. Sledge accompanied him to the door. The butler opened it ceremoniously. Blackie could see the green water lapping almost at the threshold of the door.

"Here goes nothing," he said nervously. He waved to Sledge and stepped over the threshold of the castle door. His boot touched the water and started down. It was deeper than he thought. It wasn't until he started to fall, that he cried out. Then it was too late.

Off balance, he toppled into the water and sank over his head. He plummeted down and down, endlessly, before he began to strike out madly with his arms. The cold green water seemed to be pressing hungrily at him with heavy hands. His lungs were developing a torturing, unbearable ache from the pressure.

With his last strength he flailed his

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arms frantically and felt a hand grasp his own. Then he was being dragged from the green depths by strong arms. When his head cleared he was dragged back into the castle by Sledge and the butler.

"Judas Priest," he gasped, "that water must be twenty feet deep right there at the door of the castle."

That was the last attempt they made to leave the castle. The incident was not spoken of again. Both men worked methodically at their tasks. Eating and drinking and collecting treasures from various unexplored rooms of the castle became once again their unvarying routine. Time passed and the two men grew thin and gaunt for all of the rich foods they were eating. There was something inside of them, a growing fear that spread through their systems like an infection, that made even the food and drink sour in their mouths.

THEY had brought the radio from the first apartment they had occupied but they were unable to raise so much as a burst of static from it. It rested haphazardly on a chest of gold, cord trailing the floor.

It was after dinner, when they were having coffee, that Blackie broke his long silence. He stood up and glowered insanely at Sledge.

"Damn you," he grated. "Do you have to take two lumps of sugar *every* night?"

Sledge twisted in his chair, his eyes glinting murderously.

"Yes," he said softly. "I do. I do because I know it annoys you. That's the only relief from the infernal boredom of this place."

He suddenly sprang to his feet, his face thrust inches from Blackie.

"Do y' hear," he screamed. "It breaks the monotony. I can't stand it here anymore. All the food, all the drink and all the riches a man could want, and they're driving me mad. You hear? Mad!"

Blackie was quiet, almost peacefully quiet.

"Is that so," he murmured. "Well I'm going to break the monotony a bit." He drew his automatic from the pocket of his coat. "I'm going to kill you, because there's not another single thing *to* do. I'm going to kill you and everyone else in this damnable place."

"Go ahead!" Sledge screamed. His own fist dug for his gun. He clawed it from his pocket and twin explosions blasted the silence. Both men fired simultaneously. Their automatics spoke a stuttering song of death.

Blackie felt bullet after bullet pound into his body, but he stood on his feet, a vicious joy coursing through him as he saw his own bullets spatter into Sledge's swaying form. He laughed wildly, madly, as his gun went silent in his hand. He drew his arm back and hurled the gun at Sledge. It struck him in the face, cutting his cheek.

Blackie felt something strike his own face and he realized that Sledge had emptied his own gun and copied the gesture.

Panting heavily, the two men stared at each other. There were six gaping holes in each of their bodies, and blood was streaming from their wounds and dripping to the marble floor. There was a horrible fear growing in the eyes of each man. They looked at each other with loathing and terror.

"I—I don't feel a—a thing!" Blackie gasped.

"Neither do I!" Sledge cried hoarsely.

SUDDENLY, from behind them, they heard the radio speaking. Both men stood transfixed, frozen, as the announcer's voice swelled into the room:

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"The bloody, crushed bodies of Blackie Nolan and Sledge Scarpetti were found today by police officers. The bodies lay near their overturned car."

"What does he mean?" Blackie screamed. "He's crazy. We ain't dead. We're alive—safe."

There was no sound from the radio, but from behind them there came a soft, derisive chuckle. Blackie and Sledge wheeled, their nerves tightening. The slim young man with the black hair was standing next to the radio, one hand idly touching the dial.

Blackie started to cry out, but a hand of terror caught at his throat. For he had stared into the young man's eyes! They were a deep green in color but there was something *behind* those eyes, something so loathsome and sickening that he staggered back in terror.

"Who are you?" he gasped hoarsely.

The young man continued to smile faintly.

"Haven't you guessed?" he murmured. He bowed slightly in mock deference. "Men call me—*Satan!*"

The last word hissed like a lash, and a mighty clap of thunder seemed to crash over their heads, as if to drown out the awful echoes of that dread name.

Blackie cried out in terror and sank to his knees. When he raised his head, he and Sledge were alone again. Sledge was pulling at his arm, crying frantically in his ear.

"What did he mean?"

Blackie stared with sudden, terrible understanding at the accumulated heaps of maddening, yet worthless treasures. And his mind looked ahead to emptiness and desolation and always the moan of wind and the hiss of rain and the roar of thunder. His understanding was like a heavy weight that pressed unbearably on him.

"We been dead since the automobile crash," he said, choking.

Sledge turned to him, eyes widening in horror. "You mean we're in—"

He looked into Blackie's eye and forgot to finish the sentence. For in Blackie's eyes he read the answer . . .

TIME from the STARS

By GERALD VANCE

IF YOU'RE ever caught out without your watch on a night when the stars are visible don't worry. If it's really imperative that you know the time, you can tell it from the stars. It's not the simplest method in the world, but it might be helpful if no other means exists.

Consider the Pole star as the center of a huge clock and the point of the dipper as the hour hand. The numeral six will be below the Pole star and twelve will be above. Taking the time as indicated by the pointer of the Dipper, you can add to that figure the number of months that have elapsed since the first of January to the nearest quarter month. The resulting sum is doubled and subtracted from sixteen and a quarter. If the result is more than sixteen and a quarter, subtract it from forty and a quarter. The answer is time in hours after noon.

Just for instance now, suppose it is late September and the pointers of the sky clock correspond to the position of the hour hand at seven o'clock. Eight and three-fourths months have elapsed since New Year's Day. This is added to seven making fifteen and three-quarters. Double this is thirty-one and one-half. Subtracting from forty and one-quarter gives eight and three-quarters, or 8:45 P.M.

So the next time you're late for a date with the little lady, just explain that it took you so long to figure out the time from the heavens, that before you realized it you were two and three-quarter hours late. And don't apologize.

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The GODDESS

by Duncan Farnsworth

Utter triumph was Sarndoff's when he restored Marsha Hunter to life as a goddess who knew nothing but to love

"VERY nice!"

Sarndoff laid the newspaper carelessly on the floor beside his comfortable lounge chair and turned his attention back to the clipping he had torn from its pages.

SOCIETY GIRL IN FATAL
AUTO CRASH

For a moment Sarndoff's eyes lingered on this headline, relishing its every word. Then they swept on to the news account that followed.

"Marsha Hunter, prominent Westhaven society girl, was killed early this morning when the sports roadster she was driving went out of control on dangerous Black Curve in the Harrow Mountains, five miles from here, and hurtled two hundred feet off the cliff.

"Miss Hunter was returning alone from her father's mountain lodge at approximately 3:30 A.M. when the tragedy occurred. Scarcely fifteen minutes after this, a motorist driving along the same road noticed the shattered guard rail at the cliff edge of the treacherous curve. He immediately informed—"

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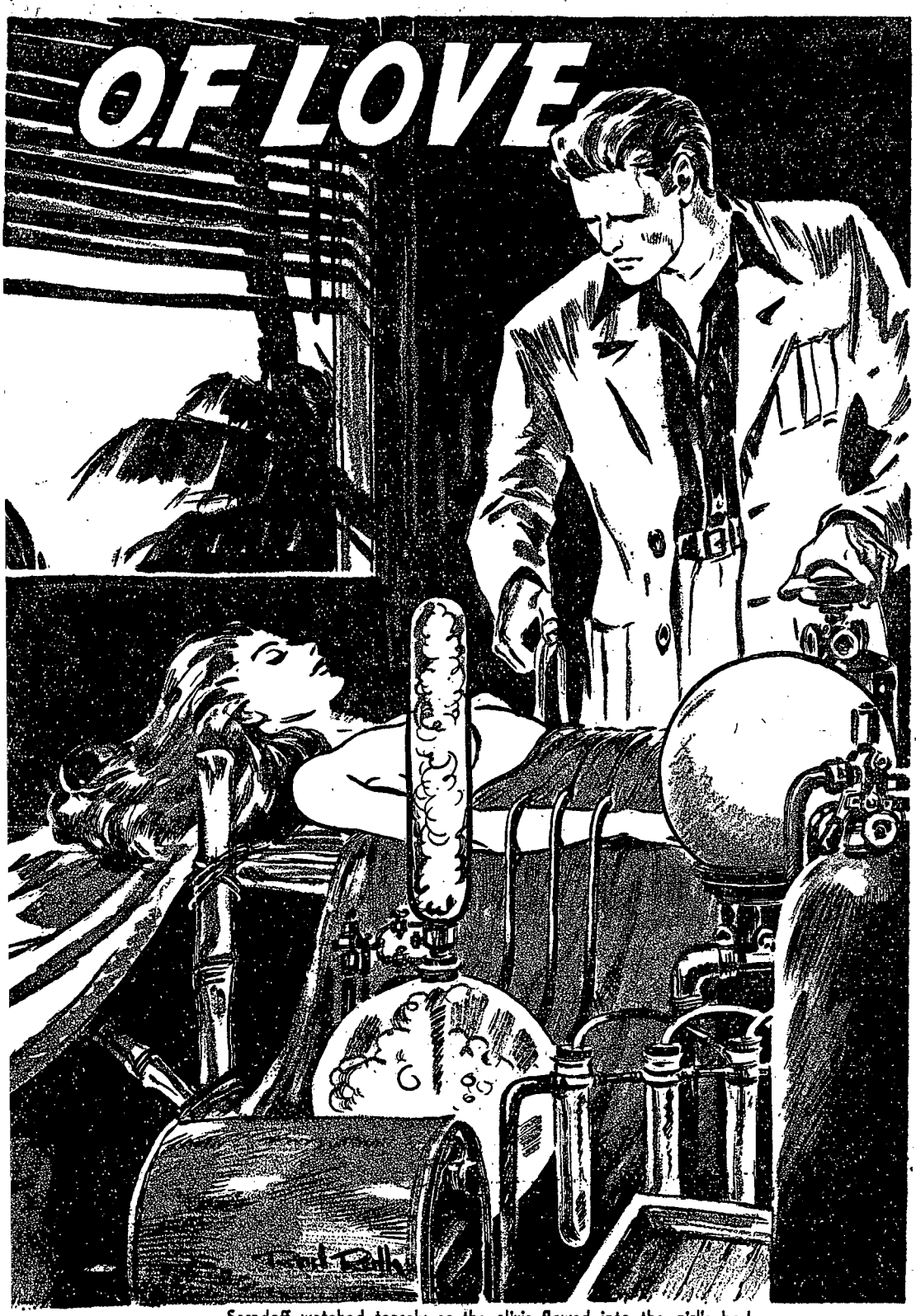

Sarndoff watched tensely as the elixir flowed into the girl's body

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Sarndoff smiled. He knew the rest of the account almost by heart. Carefully, he folded the clipping and placed it in the breast pocket of his smoking jacket. Then, knocking out the ashes in his pipe, he looked at his watch.

It was almost noon. Yaeng should have been back by now. Irritably, Sarndoff rose and walked over to the window. He stood there, looking down at the gravel roadway leading up to his estate, while his strong slim fingers tattooed impatiently on the window pane.

Sarndoff was a big man, solid and heavy shouldered. His features had a Slavic, almost Mongolian, cast to them. Yet the pince nez fixed to his hawk-like nose, the tailoring of his very expensive clothing, and the aroma of his fine tobacco made a sharp contrast to the rugged brutality of his physique.

Sarndoff was thinking of his all consuming passion for Marsha Hunter—a desire that had inflamed his very soul from the first moment he had set eyes on her over a year ago. And with these thoughts there returned to him the maddening frustration of her coldness toward him. His features hardened, and his eyes narrowed as he recalled that evening a month ago at the Hunt Club when she'd told him of her love for another, and younger, man.

It wasn't part of Sarndoff's ruthless nature to accept this twist of fate. Another man might have shrugged, smiled as best he could, and made the best of it. But Sarndoff, as he faced Marsha there on the veranda of the Hunt Club, had suddenly gone a little insane with the jealousy and rage that engulfed him. He'd stepped forward and grabbed Marsha's slim shoulders cruelly.

"I'll have you, do you understand? I'll have you even if it's in hell!" His eyes blazed madly, and the girl, shocked and terrified at this sudden unmasking of the man, had torn herself from his arms and backed away white-faced.

A sudden loathing had been in her eyes.

"Until this moment—" the girl had begun, "I thought you were—" again she had choked off, and finally blurted. "I loath you, I hate you, do you understand?"

She had been sobbing as she dashed off into the garden. Sarndoff hadn't tried to follow her.

A long black limousine appeared at the entrance to the gravel driveway below him. Sarndoff smiled. Yaeng was back.

MINUTES later, Sarndoff once again reclined in his easy chair while a short, thin, yellow-skinned man, dressed in the black uniform of a chauffeur, stood before him.

"You accomplished your task very creditably, Yaeng," Sarndoff said. There was the slightest lisp of accent in his voice.

Yaeng smiled, exposing a row of jagged, dirty-brown teeth. He made a slight, obsequious bow.

"Did you encounter any difficulty on your mission?" Sarndoff asked.

"It was very easy for anyone of mechanical ability," Yaeng answered. His tone was totally without inflection. High and almost metallic. "An adjustment in the steering mechanism, an equally simple operation on the brakes, and the result was made certain."

"It is already in the newspapers," Sarndoff said. "Doubtless you have seen them?"

Yaeng nodded, rubbing a claw-like hand over his bald head.

"I observed as much."

Sarndoff reached for his tobacco humidor and began to fill his pipe.

"Our most important work lies ahead of us, however," he reminded the little

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yellow man. "And we must wait a week until we can safely begin that."

Yaeng smiled dirty-brown again.

"I am eager to begin."

Sarndoff struck a match and applied it to his pipe. Between puffs, he said:

"You may go, now. And, incidentally, I think it only fitting that we send a telegram of condolence to Miss Hunter's bereaved parents."

Yaeng's dirty-brown grin widened.

"I shall see that it is done," he promised. He bowed once more, turned, and left the room. Sarndoff sat there smiling. A week should be sufficient time. The funeral would be over by then, and there would, of course, be no suspicion.

THE ground was rather hard, and the shovel with which Yaeng toiled clicked metallically as it struck occasional bits of rock.

"Careful, you fool," Sarndoff hissed. He stood behind one of the two cloth-swathed lanterns at the head of the grave. "Do you want to have the caretaker down on us?"

Yaeng, waist deep in the grave pit, wiped the sweat from his yellow skull and wordlessly resumed his digging. Sarndoff drummed his slim, sinewy fingers on the edge of the large marble headstone, his thick lips pressing hard together in impatience. Now and then he peered nervously through the gloomy darkness of the cemetery.

Many minutes later Sarndoff whispered irritably:

"Hurry with that. The moon will not hide behind clouds indefinitely."

And Yaeng's shovel, at that instant, clacked hard against a solid substance. He looked up, grinning wearily.

"I have reached her," he hissed.

Hurriedly, Sarndoff began to remove his topcoat.

"Hold, and I will assist you with the rest of it," he said.

Half an hour after that, a small truck purred swiftly away from the high gray wall of an isolated section of the cemetery. Yaeng was at the wheel. Sarndoff sat beside him. In the back, firmly secured against the jouncing of the rutted roadways, was a metal casket.

IT was two days after their nocturnal visit to the cemetery that Sarndoff faced Yaeng in the library of his home. The little yellow man was clad in a somber black suit and carried a black homburg hat in his taloned fingers.

"It will be good to get back," Yaeng said tonelessly. "I have been away for so long." His thin mouth split in a stained grin.

"I have taken care of our passports and arranged that Miss Hunter's casket, under the guise of archaeological implements, be shipped on the same boat. You will travel, of course, as my valet." Sarndoff spoke nervously. He was wearing gray tweeds and carrying a topcoat across his arm. "Are the rest of the bags packed?"

Yaeng nodded.

"And the instruments from the laboratory?" Sarndoff demanded.

Again Yaeng shook his head affirmatively.

"They are."

"Very well then," Sarndoff said, still nervously. "We may as well get started. Our boat sails at five o'clock. We've but three hours to get to the pier."

Sarndoff waved his hand, dismissing the little yellow man. And when Yaeng had left the room, he began pacing back and forth across the room, pulling on his pipe and contemplating the thick nap of the rug. It was hard to keep a faint tremble from his hands, or an irregular tattoo of excitement from his heart.

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"Within a month, now," Sarndoff muttered to himself. "Within a month I will have her in my arms." And at the words his heart stepped up its drumming.

THEY were three days out, and Sarndoff sat alone in the luxurious quarters of his deluxe suite on the majestic liner *Pacific*. He was in his dressing robe, and sat behind the small mahogany desk of the living room.

In his hand was a pen, and before him the small yellow morocco-bound volume that provided Sarndoff's most curiously contrasting indulgence—a diary.

Sarndoff wrote in a large, flowing hand, pausing occasionally to look through the porthole directly across the room from him. A soft breeze gently stirred the curtains of the window, and coming faintly through it to Sarndoff were the muted strains of a dance band playing on the deck below.

"There are but five more days before we stop at Motopau Island," Sarndoff wrote. *"My impatience increases daily, almost feverishly. It is hard to wait for our arrival, and harder yet in face of the fact that Marsha is here on board with me. It is difficult not to go below for an opportunity to look but once at her. However, that would be foolish, extremely so, and would only arouse suspicions."*

Sarndoff paused again, looking at the open porthole as though trying to catch the melody of the music that floated faintly in the air. Then he returned to his writing.

"I have been able to pass much of the time," he continued, *"in going over the charts and formulae, my own, and the ancient papers belonging to Yaeng. There is little doubt of succeeding. Everything checks perfectly. Modern science, combined with the wisdom of the ancients, assures us of success."*

Sarndoff paused again, smiling faintly, then resumed.

"It is most amusing to watch Yaeng's increasing restlessness. The little fool is a veritable flea's nest of superstition, most of it derived from the extraneous hodge-podge in those ancient papers. He is quite convinced that his people on the island will have a goddess from the past, once the experiments have been concluded. It is just as well, of course, for otherwise he would not fall in with my plans nearly as eagerly. The passages in the ancient papers pertaining to the Goddess of Love are obvious to all but a fool like Yaeng."

Looking up again, Sarndoff rested his eyes momentarily, then went on with his writing.

"Obviously those passages mean exactly what I am certain they do. Through this ancient alchemy, Marsha, when brought back to life, will be forever my slave—utterly all loving. And being all loving, she will give to me such utter devotion, such encompassing affection as no man has ever known before."

Sarndoff put down his pen long enough to knock the ashes from his pipe. When he began again, he wrote:

"Again and again the tremendous irony of it all occurs to me. To be utterly, completely loved by a woman who would once have none of my affection, who despised me, is almost more than I can bear anticipating. It is certain that Yaeng's island people will not have a goddess of love to worship, but I will have one to worship me!"

THERE was a sound on the deck immediately outside Sarndoff's stateroom, and quickly he snapped shut his diary, slipping it into the pocket of his dressing gown as Yaeng entered.

Yaeng wore the same plain black

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suit, but his manner, as he faced Sarndoff, was different from that of four days ago. His eyes had a burning intensity to them, and the muscles at the corners of his thin mouth twitched sporadically as he spoke in his toneless, metallic tenor.

"The Goddess is growing restless," Yaeng said. "I feel it deep inside me. I find it hard to wait for our arrival."

Sarndoff rubbed his hand irritably along his jaw line. Yaeng, for the past two days, had insisted upon calling her the Goddess. This was science, the old combined with the new, and the yellow man's insistence on aligning it with a weird witchery was becoming vexing to Sarndoff.

"Time will pass quickly enough," Sarndoff snapped. "Keep yourself busy in your role of valet and it will hasten itself."

Yaeng nodded respectfully.

"Excuse my impatience."

But Sarndoff could see his taloned fingers twitching nervously.

"None of your people expect our arrival, or know of what we plan to do?" Sarndoff suddenly found himself saying. He could have bitten his tongue, in the next instant, for the clumsy way in which he'd phrased the question.

But Yaeng, apparently, was too keyed up to notice.

"Of course not. And I shall not tell them until we have given life to the Goddess."

Sarndoff smiled, forcing himself to do so.

"It is better that way. We'll not be bothered with interference from any others. Our plans must be kept in strictest secrecy until we're certain of success." He yawned elaborately, then: "I am fatigued. The strain also tells on me. I shall retire. Good night."

Yaeng watched Sarndoff leave the room, a curious expression on his features. The curtain on the open porthole was flapping in a sudden flurry of wind. Rain drops spattered against the door of the stateroom and on the deck, increasingly louder, increasingly faster. Yaeng looked down at the floor, as if mentally piercing through many more such metal floors—all the way to the hold—where a metal casket was crated.

Yaeng looked up again.

"Even the Goddess is restless," he muttered. Then he walked over to the porthole and shut it against the sudden squall that broke forth.

THE breathless heat of the bright Pacific morning pressed in through the open portholes of the stateroom, five days later, as Sarndoff—wearing a white linen suit and with a pith helmet at his elbow—sat before the mahogany writing desk. His diary was before him, and quickly his hand moved again and again across the page as he wrote.

"At last we are here," Sarndoff's flowing penmanship was now somewhat sloppy in his haste, *"and I am more than grateful. The series of squalls that followed us from the third day on were bad enough, but Yaeng's idiotic interpretation of them was worse. He insisted, when he woke me this morning, that this first tranquil day was due to nothing less than the fact that the Goddess—I mean Marsha—realized we had finally arrived at Motopau Island.*

"His inane superstitions are beginning to wear on my nerves, and I shall be exceedingly glad when our resurrection, so to speak, has been accomplished. I am certain that he has kept our secret from his people here on the island. And from his description of the house he selected for us, I am quite satisfied. It is far enough away from things to permit seclusion, yet modern enough to allow for our laboratory equipment being

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properly installed.

"We are docked, now, and ready to disembark. I shall have to superintend the unloading of Marsha and our equipment personally. I couldn't trust the task even to Yaeng. From the glimpse I had of Motopau Island, it is a stinking little hole. But of course, it was essential to come here in order to work with the ancient materials of science right at hand."

There was a sudden knock on the stateroom door. Sarndoff shut his diary and looked up.

"Come in," he said.

A steward poked his head into the stateroom.

"Inspection is over, Professor Sarndoff," he said. "It's all right to go ashore now."

"Thank you," Sarndoff replied. He stood up, stuffing his tiny morocco bound volume in his inside coat pocket. Then, picking up his pith helmet, he moved to the door.

IN the east wing of their sprawling tropical quarters, two weeks later, Sarndoff and Yaeng stood feverishly over a series of bubbling vials that lined the wall of the room they'd converted into a laboratory.

On a small table before Sarndoff there were charts, figures, and formulae on crisp, white paper. And beside these lay yellowed, time-cracked sheets of ancient parchment. There were chemical tubes in a rack to his right. And on a table to his left, there was an array of strangely-scented, curiously-shaped herbs and roots.

"I think the solutions I compounded from the herbs are correct this time," Sarndoff said breathlessly. "The color seems precisely right." He looked at the roots and herbs to his left. "You can take those away. It won't be necessary to make any more solutions from them. We've hit it, I believe."

Yaeng's toneless metallic speech was filled with tense excitement as he picked them up and asked:

"Then it is almost ready?"

Sarndoff looked up from the tube.

"Wha— er, oh, yes. Of course. We are almost ready." There was a blazing intensity in his eyes. He steadied one hand with another as he took the bubbling tube directly in front of him from the burner on which it had been heating.

Yaeng was back beside him in another instant.

"I have her ready," he said. His face was almost ashen beneath the yellow parchment of his skin.

Sarndoff looked up from a chart. He swallowed hard.

"Roll the apparatus in," he ordered.

Yaeng disappeared, and came back a moment later pushing a large, cart-like machine atop which—under a battery of empty tubes—lay the half-clad body of a girl. Her eyes were closed, tightly shut in death, and her arms lay rigidly beside her. On either side, streaming down from the slight platform on which she lay, were beautiful strands of golden hair.

"Marsha," Sarndoff muttered hoarsely. "Soon, my loved one—"

"The Goddess is ready," Yaeng broke in. His hands on the side of the cart-like machine now shook as if palsied. There was a look closely akin to terror in his slant eyes.

FROM each of the tubes arranged over the lifeless form of the blonde girl, there were tiny, siphon-like hoses. To the end of each of these was attached a hypodermic needle of thicker than usual proportions. Now, working with swift frenzy, Sarndoff inserted the needle ends of the tube-siphons into the sides of the girl. Three on her

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left side, two on her right.

The tubes behind him now—those filled with the various colored liquids—were bubbling. Swiftly, eyes fastened to the charts before him, Sarndoff began mixing the liquids into a larger glass graduate. As each operation was completed, Sarndoff poured a measure of the resultant chemical into one of the tubes above the girl's body.

Slowly, down through the siphon-like hoses, through the thick hypo needles, and into the girl's veins, these liquids bubbled. Sarndoff, upon filling all the tubes, shut the burners off automatically and stood watching the girl. His face seemed frozen in the rigidity of suspense.

Swiftly, now, Sarndoff moved from one needle to another, removing them from the girl's body. He reached to his side, found a larger hypodermic needle, and quickly plunged the point into her body directly below the heart. Then, breathing heavily through his thick nostrils, Sarndoff stepped back, face white, taut, watching.

Yaeng had completely lost composure. He was on his knees now, opposite Sarndoff, mumbling incoherently in a strange tribal dialect.

And then, faintly at first, the girl stirred!

Sarndoff had time to fight against the breath that seemed choking in his lungs. The girl was now obviously breathing.

Yaeng moaned audibly, and for the first time, Sarndoff remembered his presence. Eyes still on the girl, Sarndoff's hand went to his smock pocket, found the small automatic he'd put there.

Sarndoff turned away from the girl merely an instant. Yaeng's head was bent, providing an excellent target. Sarndoff squeezed the trigger twice; two blasts rang forth. Yaeng pitched face forward to the floor.

"You were no longer useful, superstitious clod," Sarndoff grated. Then, eyes blazing in triumph, he turned back to the miracle he'd wrought. Marsha Hunter, eyes dazed and uncomprehending, was sitting upright.

"Marsha," the word came chokingly from Sarndoff. "Marsha!"

The girl looked down at him. The dazed expression left her blue eyes. She smiled, and Sarndoff had never had such rapture as that smile. Her arms reached out to him, and insane with his exultation, Sarndoff helped her down from the platform, put his arms around her, and felt the answering ardor of her embrace.

The maddening, overwhelming, sweeping passion Sarndoff had felt for the girl before was now increased a thousandfold by the reciprocation of his love. The look in her eyes was more than he had dreamed could come to one man. It swept him to her, and held him there, and bound him forever to her.

The room wheeled giddily for Sarndoff, ecstatically, blazingly. At the feet of Marsha Hunter sprawled the bloody body of Yaeng, who had knelt in adoration to the Goddess of Love.

IT was safe for Sarndoff, after another week had passed, to take the resurrected Marsha Hunter aboard an out-going steamer from Motopau. And in that week he forged necessary papers and identifications, even to bribing a local consular official to arrange passports for the girl. He booked passage on a small liner that would take them to Shanghai, and keeping the girl in closest seclusion, brought her aboard the vessel in the guise of an invalid.

And Marsha Hunter, who had once despised him, was now all-loving. There was no mistaking her boundless affection, and Sarndoff, drunk with wild,

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triumphant exultation, didn't notice any changes in the girl. He was intoxicated with her beauty, her love. And he was further delighted in the fact that she recalled nothing of her former life.

They were two days away from Shanghai when Sarndoff walked the promenade deck for the first time with Marsha Hunter. He felt the eyes of all they passed fix in fascination on the incredible beauty of the girl. And for the first hour this filled him with a fierce pride. Marsha, holding fast to his arm, seemed not to notice the fact that there were any other passengers in existence, so rapt was her attention to him.

But then they were stopped by a junior officer, who saluted, eyes fixed in astonishment on Marsha, and said:

"Good morning, Professor Sarndoff."

Sarndoff turned smilingly down to Marsha, and then his eyes blazed in sudden maddening jealousy. The girl was gazing at the handsome young junior officer with a look that—

No, it was ridiculously impossible. Sarndoff told himself this, as he took the girl hastily back to the cabin.

But once inside, he slammed the stateroom door shut and turned to face Marsha Hunter.

"You love me," Sarndoff said desperately. "You love me, don't you?" He grabbed her by the shoulders, feeling an unexplicable wave of wild rage flooding him.

Marsha Hunter looked into his eyes with childish naivety and brimming affection.

"I do," she said, puzzled. "Of course I do." And she threw her arms around him, while Sarndoff felt his jealous rage leaving, her perfume strong in his nostrils.

And that evening, at the ship's dance, Sarndoff had to take her away once more. He could have sworn that on five occasions, with as many men, he caught the same look in Marsha Hunter's eyes as she had given the junior officer that afternoon.

In the cabin this time he raged.

"You cannot love me. I know you lie! How can you love me and look at those others as you do?"

That puzzled, childishly naive expression crept over her face again, and she answered:

"But I love you. I do love you. Of course I do!"

Sarndoff felt his temples throbbing unbearably. He had a wild, jealous desire to put his hands around that lovely young throat and squeeze until there was no more pulse beating there. Instead, he screamed:

"Yet to each of the men this evening, and to that junior officer this afternoon, you acted as if you loved them! You could not look at them that way, and love me!"

The girl who was Marsha Hunter looked perplexed. An unbearably sweet smile stole over her lovely lips as she replied:

"I do love them. Each of them, so very much. And of course, I love you —so very much!"

Sarndoff felt as if he were going stark raving mad. His face was ashen, his massive shoulders shaking in ungovernable rage. A red, screaming, weakening jealousy was turning his heart into a blot of wrenching anguish.

The girl moved toward him, her arms reaching for him.

Sarndoff backed away.

"No!" he shrieked. "You're driving me mad, I tell you. Stay back! I can't stand this. Stay back!"

He found himself against a wall desk, and his hand went automatically to the drawer. There was a gun there. The same gun with which he'd blown Yaeng's brains out. Now it was in his

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hand, and though he had no recollection of wishing it so, he had it pointed at the girl's heart.

"I love them, of course," she was saying, moving toward him, "but I love you, of course."

"All-loving," Sarndoff babbled, "all-loving. I know what that damnable yellowed script meant now. But it's too late. I can't stand it any more!" His eyes blazed, lips twisted.

"Please," the girl said, red lips half parted invitingly. "I have told you how I love you." She stretched out her arms to him.

Sarndoff was conscious of the automatic in his hand kicking hard against the rigid line of his wrist. Smoke was filling the room, and before the blurred haze of madness that screened his eyes, he saw the girl—the center of her dress splashed crimson—sinking to the floor while dazed, uncomprehending agony flooded her eyes.

He was muttering thickly as he turned the gun to his own temple.

"Yaeng was right, right. She was not Marsha Hunter, but a Goddess; the *Goddess of Love*. All-loving. All-loving."

Then Sarndoff sueezed the trigger and the last shot blasted the silence.

ARABIAN NIGHTS UP TO DATE!

Infra-red light is a scientific term today! It is used in photography, in piercing fog, and in the laboratory. But maybe the ancient genii of Bagdad knew something about science too. Anyway, this particular genie wasn't very happy about being the slave of a lamp no one could see—much less rub, and thus put him to work! And that's all he wanted: a job! But a thousand years difference in time makes a difference in jobs . . . which he soon found out. Let author William P. McGivern tell you the story of "AL ADDIN AND THE INFRA-RED LAMP" in the

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fantastic ADVENTURES

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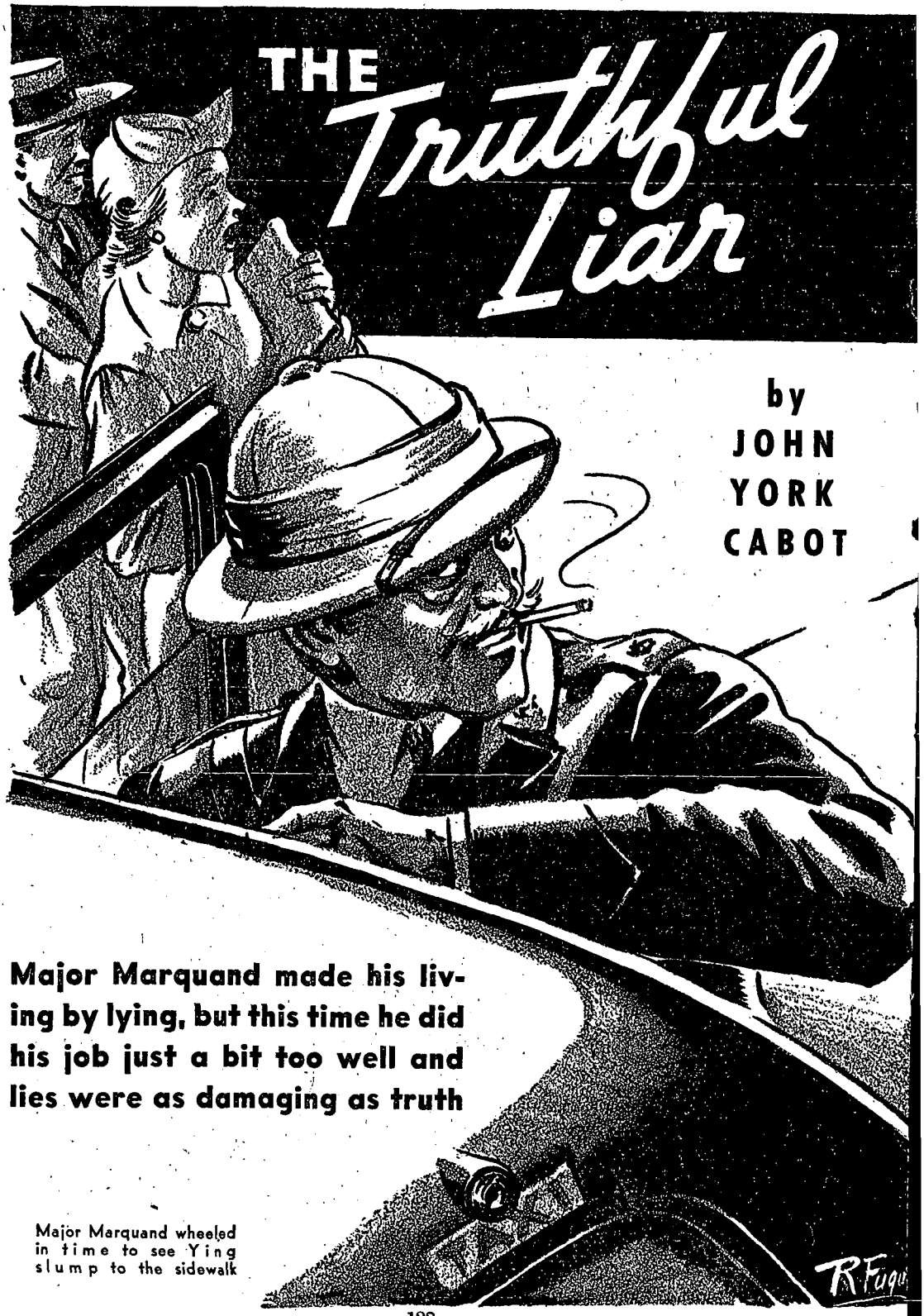
THE Truthful Liar

by JOHN YORK CABOT



Major Marquand made his living by lying, but this time he did his job just a bit too well and lies were as damaging as truth

Major Marquand wheeled in time to see Ying slump to the sidewalk

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"THEN you will not reconsider, Major Marquand?" the little oriental pleaded. "You will have no change of heart?"

The tall, moustached man smiled contemptuously.

"I have told you, Ying, that you are a fool. The money is gone, and that's all there is to it. Unfortunate, but final." He turned away, as if to leave. The little oriental reached forth and put a detaining hand on his arm.

"That money," Ying said softly, "was for war relief of my people. It meant food and clothing and bandages and medicines for the poor and the weak and helpless."

"You should have thought of that," Major Marquand declared with bland unconcern, "before you risked it. After all, your people trusted you to handle the funds."

"But you told me that I was not risking it. You told me that it was a foolproof investment which would bring returns for my people's money!" Ying was fighting hard to keep his voice level.

"There is no such thing as a foolproof investment," Major Marquand smiled. "You know this by now. What happened was unfortunate. But I can do nothing about it. Now, if you please, I'll say goodbye. Perhaps we'll meet again and laugh over this misfortune." Once more Major Marquand turned to leave, and once more Ying seized his arm.

"In the legends of my people, Major Marquand, there is a very ancient incantation. It has been used only against those of your stripe." Ying half closed his eyes, and recited, almost inaudibly, *"May the Gods of Truth control your lies against you; and through the hours*

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of this day, may the demons of hell follow the untruths from your foul tongue!"

Major Marquand smiled mockingly.

"Very pretty," he applauded. "Now, Ying, get off the steps of this hotel. And if you bother me with so much as a visit again, I'll have you thrown out. Good day!"

Major Marquand was at the door of the hotel, just stepping toward his cab, when the pistol shot rang out. By the time he had wheeled, to stare down the sidewalk, a tiny knot of horrified pedestrians had gathered around the body of Ying. The little oriental had put a bullet through his brain.

IN the cocktail bar of the Hotel Carlo, late that afternoon, Major Milo Marquand, tanned, virile, and immaculately tailored in a fresh suit of whites, sat in pleasant contemplation sipping a brandy.

The affair of the suicide was now almost forgotten. At least it was buried among the unpleasant trifles of the day. The management of the hotel had been very swift and efficient in ridding Major Marquand of the bother of a police report investigation. They realized that a guest as important as the Major would think kindly toward them for it.

The major smiled at his reflection in the mirror behind the bar, fully realizing what a militarily handsome figure he presented. His appearance was his greatest stock in trade. That slight scar at his jaw, for example, could pass with quiet modesty as the souvenir he had obtained in the Arabian fighting. This, in spite of the fact that the scar had been obtained on the sharp edge of a beer bottle in a fight in Hell's Kitchen while a youth.

And the slight Roman ridge in his nose—patrician though it looked—was a reminder of an unpleasant three years spent in the state reformatory. He'd gotten it stealing from a cellmate.

But that and other murky outlines of his past were all behind him now. For Major Milo Marquand—christened by his drunken mother as Nicki Moretti—was a very wealthy man. In fact this stay at the expensive Hotel Carlo was in celebration of his recent attainment of seventy-five thousand dollars.

The seventy-five grand should see him through at least three years of good living. Three years in which he could do a lot of traveling, and let his scent cool off quite a bit. Not that the cops were hot after him, he told himself again, but in the "con" game a person is wise to lay low after a big killing.

And the war relief funds swindled from the guileless Ying had been a plenty big killing—and safe. The major had counted on Ying's shame to keep the little oriental's mouth shut. And the suicide, rather than face his people, was more than the major had dared hope for. Now everything was right. The major ordered another drink in honor of Ying.

It would be good to take a rest, the major thought happily. But he couldn't resist stooping to flip the bartender for double-or-nothing on the drink. Just a sporting gesture from a grand gentleman to a servant. And when the grand gentleman, Major Marquand, had won, he put his two-headed half dollar back in his pocket and smiled benignly on the servant bartender.

The bar had been deserted save for the major and the tender, but now a short, pudgy, leather skinned man of middle age entered and took a stool beside Marquand. Instantly and instinctively—from long practice—the major sized up the newcomer.

THE man was wearing expensive clothes that were, nevertheless,

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baggy and ill-fitting. The hide color of his skin marked him as being from the west or southwestern States.

"Cow money," the major thought. "Or oil." He smiled engagingly at the pudgy little man, also a habit of long practice.

"Have a drink with me, sir," the major said, putting on his best, slightly British accent.

The newcomer looked up, startled and pleased.

"Well, that's right nice of you, stranger," he said. His drawl scored the major's first guess as to origin a hundred per cent. "Don't mind if I do."

The bartender took the newcomer's order, straight rye (and went off to get the bottle, smiling fondly at the major's democratic ways.

"You look like a Texan," the major declared after a moment.

The newcomer grinned.

"Not so far off, at that. I hail from Oklahoma. My name's Scragg. What's yours?" He held out a hand that wasn't pudgy, but was brown and hard.

The major gave him a firm military grip and his name.

"Well, now," said Scragg. "A fighting man, eh?"

The major smiled modestly.

"Hardly, old chap. That is, not any more. I saw a bit of service back awhile." Then, easily, "Are you traveling on business, or just on vacation?"

"Well," Scragg seemed to appriase the major for an instant as if debating whether or not he should immediately take him into close confidence. The major smiled, melting Scragg's conversational ice jam. "Well," he went on, "a little bit of both. You see Ma and I—always call the Missus Ma—Ma and I have got to go down to Saint Looie to clear out the rest of her father's estate. Sell property and all like that. Her pop passed away about six months back. Left her quite a bit he'd made on okie oil speculations in the past five years."

Something inside Major Marquand reacted like a fire gong on an engine horse. In spite of his resolve to keep strictly away from business, he found himself mentally scratching his itchy palms.

"Oil speculations are deucedly interesting," Major Marquand fished. "Had a bit of a go with oil speculations in Iraq, some years back. Just dabbled, y'know."

"Did you now?" Scragg was pleased at finding a common bond with this obviously high-toned stranger. "Then you'll be interested in hearing about our wells, the ones the Missus' pop left to her."

"Right now," said Major Marquand, "I hold nothing but South African mining interests, but you've no idea how much your oil talk will interest me."

"Mines, eh?" said Scragg, duely impressed. "Bartender, get this here major gentleman what he wants to drink." And then, volubly, and in great detail, Mr. Scragg sailed into a complete accounting of his oil wells. And as Scragg talked on, Major Marquand bought drink after drink, for some of which he flipped his two-headed half dollar with the bartender.

AT the end of an hour, Scragg had exhausted his oil information. And at the end of that time, Major Marquand was exultantly certain that this fish had at least two-hundred-thousand dollars of ready cash waiting to find a smarter pocket. The temptation was terrible. Something in the back of his brain kept hinting to the major that this was too good to pass up, and that luck runs in cycles, and that he was swinging into the peak of his cycle. At length,

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Major Marquand gave way to temptation. He began to talk about his South African mining holdings.

"Diamonds," said Scragg, properly awed. "There must be a fortune in diamonds!"

Major Marquand smiled deprecatingly.

"Not so much as you'd think there was," he said. "Why, I've one mine on which the yearly yield is only a hundred thousand."

Major Marquand picked this time as appropriate for tipping the bartender a fiver with the round of drinks he brought up. Any doubts that Scragg might have held as to the actual worth of the mine promptly vanished.

"How many mines do you have?" Scragg asked almost breathlessly.

"There now," the major laughed at himself, "I've started trying to pass myself off as a chap of great wealth. To be utterly frank, old boy, it's not as big as it sounds. You see, I've only three mines. Each is in the same territory."

Scragg took a deep breath, opened his mouth, swallowed the hook, and was on. From that moment, Major Marquand felt certain he had him. They left the bar two hours later, parting in front of the main desk of the hotel.

"And I want you and your wife to be my guests at dinner this evening," the major reminded Scragg.

Scragg was starry-eyed.

"I don't know how I'll ever repay you, Major," he declared a bit thickly. "Your a white man, certain. That transaction is all in my favor. I feel as if me and Ma was cheating you blind."

The major waved his hand.

"Don't be silly. I've a hunch I can make oil pay me something. It'll be fun trying, at the least." Then he turned to the desk clerk.

"I'll be expecting a cable for the Maharajah of Ejkar in the next hour or so. Will you see that it's sent up to my room promptly, boy?"

Scragg looked at the major as if he might swoon with excitement.

"One of them Indian Prince fellows?" he asked.

"An old friend," the major nodded. "We play chess by cable. He might not have figured out his move yet, but I expect to hear from him soon."

Scragg extended his hand.

"Until dinner, Major," he said.

"Until dinner, Mr. Scragg."

"Call me George," Mr. Scragg begged.

The major smiled fondly.

"I've not many friends, George. But I've certainly taken a liking to you, old chap." It was like patting a puppy on the head. Scragg walked off in a daze of pride. The major watched him go. Then he turned to the desk clerk. "I'm also expecting a carton of Fielding-Nought cigarettes from New York. My special brand. If they arrive, send them up."

Fielding-Noughts were a dollar the package. Major Marquand strolled to the elevators happy in the knowledge that everything was running smoothly. Two-hundred-seventy-five grand would be so much nicer than a mere seventy-five. Already the major was a little bit disgusted with himself for having been so easily satisfied.

IN his luxurious suite of rooms, the major opened his luggage and rummaged back and forth until he finally located the papers he wanted: his South African mining deeds. He looked at them fondly as he put them atop his bureau. He'd never imagined he'd use these again. They'd been good in nailing lots of small fry in the old days. And the major's judgment of George Scragg placed the Oklahoman as being

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distinctively small fry, but with big-time cash reserves.

The major smiled, recalling the latter part of the conversation at the bar. Two-hundred-thousand cash, in exchange for a stinking old hole in the earth that hadn't produced a Woolworth imitation in the last eighty years. It was a slick job, even though he wouldn't have had to have been so slick with such an easy snipe as Scragg. But, being a professional, the major took pride in doing his work well.

"Tonight I'll get the check. Cash it tomorrow; gone the following day. And Scragg will wake up two weeks later." The major mused pleasantly to himself. There were plenty of far-off places to be reached by plane in that time.

There was a knocking on his door. The major looked up.

"Come in, old chap," he shouted.

A bellhop entered.

"Cablegram," he said.

For an instant Major Marquand permitted a frown to slip across his brows. Then it was gone and he took the envelope with careless unconcern, tossing a half-dollar on the tray. The boy left.

Feverishly, then, Major Marquand tore open the cable. This was a gag of some sort. Who in the hell would be sending him a cable? He didn't know a soul who lived outside of the Uni— Major Marquand cursed in explosive bewilderment.

The cable contained chess symbols.

And it was signed: "Maharajah of Ejkar!"

The major's hand trembled ever so lightly. If this were a gag, and it *had* to be a gag since, as far as he knew, there wasn't any such person as the Maharajah of Ejkar, it was definitely screwy.

Then the major's jaws hardened. It was a gag, of course. Why, it was all it could be. Doubtless there was another "con" here at the Hotel Carlo who must have recognized him in the lobby. All right. It was funny and he'd let it go. Just so long as that other "con," whoever he was, kept his mitts off Scragg.

It was hard for the major to drive away the unnerving effects of the fake cable as he crumpled it up and tossed it in the waste basket. And it was harder still for him to sleep as he stretched out on his bed for a short nap.

Especially when another bellhop appeared less than a half hour later— bearing a long, oblong, sealed carton, postmarked, "New York."

The major was so nettled this time that he forgot to tip the bellhop, and sent him away with an uncivil grunt. For on the top of the package there was the label, "Fielding-Nought."

This was unnerving because of the fact that Major Marquand had never placed such an order with those cigarette manufacturers. And he was additionally bewildered when, on opening the package at the top of those in the carton, he saw that the long, fine tobaccoed cigarettes bore in gold lettering the name: "Major Milo Marquand!"

The major threw the carton angrily on the sofa.

"This is going a little far, whover that wise guy happens to be."

And it occurred to him then that it might be a wise idea to look up his heckler and offer to make a deal, cutting him in on the Scragg loot, if he'd be nice and mind his own business. But Milo Marquand, alias Nicki Moretti, had worked too long alone to be willing to compromise now. Especially in view of the fact that the Scragg job would be the plum of his career.

"He can go to hell," the major muttered, "whover he is!"

MRS. GEORGE SCRAGG was a mountain of a woman, with gray

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hair and thick bristle-gray eyebrows. Her skin was the same leathery tan as her husband's, and she seemed to be about the same age as her spouse. Much to the major's joy, she seemed even more tremendously impressed than her husband had been.

"And you'll meet the duke, of course, the first chance you have to visit your newly acquired mines," the major said affably.

Mrs. Scragg beamed wrinkles of sheer heavenly joy.

"I've never met real royalty before," she said excitedly. Then to her spouse: "I think it's so fine of the major, don't you, George?"

And so it went for the rest of the dinner. The Scraggs were as putty in the major's deft hands. It was childishly simple. So childishly simple that it drove away the nettling irritation he had felt over the cable and cigarette hoaxes. When at last he brought the Scraggs up to his suite to "complete the transaction and cement our friendship," the major was glowing with triumphant good cheer.

He even made a point of offering George Scragg one of the personally inscribed Fielding-Nought cigarettes, and of fishing out of the waste basket and showing him, as a casual item of interest, the cable from the Maharajah.

It was ten o'clock when, with the certified check for two-hundred-thousand from George Scragg in his pocket, the major bid the couple goodnight at his door.

"It has been charming," he smiled. Laughingly, he added: "You can stop that check the first thing in the morning, George, if the certified mine reports I show you aren't what I said they were."

Both Scraggs got a laugh out of this. The picture of a gentleman such as the major being a sharper was quite hilarious. They said their goodnights on a festive note.

The major bolted the door, once they'd gone, and drew forth the certified check with hands that trembled visibly. He felt like shouting wildly, or crying, or screaming. His elation was overpowering. And in the morning he'd have the fraudulent mine reports to turn over to George Scragg. He'd telephoned long-distance to Chicago and spoke cautiously to a trusted middle-broker who had assured him that he would make a nice set of reports which would arrive special delivery.

Major Milo Marquand sat himself down to a tumbler of whisky and a bottle of soda.

HE was just a bit woozy when the knock came on his door. It was repeated before he heard it. He crossed the room, after hiding the check under the desk blotter, and cautiously opened the door. It was a uniformed messenger who stood there.

"Major Marquand?" asked the uniformed boy. "A message from Chicago, special delivery."

The major smiled, signing for the envelope. His middle-broker had worked exceptionally fast. The reports were already here. He could show them to the Scraggs this very evening if he wished.

The boy left and the major returned to his desk. Minutes later he was poring somewhat foggily over the reports on the worthless South African dirt holes. And seconds after that he was jolted into sobriety by what he read.

"Mining holdings are valuable as hell," the report read. *Don't do a thing with them until you hear further from me. Came across the amazing news while looking up the correct forms in the consulate offices. This is on the level! Sit tight! Looks as if better*

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than half a million is involved. Will demand my cut on this, if reports I found are true. Don't peddle the damned papers. I'm not kidding."

It was signed: *"Schwartz."* Schwartz was the middle-broker in Chicago to whom the major had called. But at this minute he wasn't thinking of Schwartz. Instead, the major was thinking sickly of one paramount fact.

The Scraggs were in possession of the mining deeds. The transaction was completed. He, greedy ass that he'd been, had sold out half a million in mining property for a paltry pittance. Major Milo Marquand was driving himself slightly insane with this anguished realization.

And it was at this moment, while the major sat there, staring stupidly down at the floor, that his eye happened to hit and hold upon a picture in a newspaper that had been dropped there.

The picture was that of a sober young oriental. The caption above it read, "War Relief Head Is Suicide."

Irritated, the major kicked the paper with his foot so that the picture was no longer visible. Perhaps it was his agitation over the imminent loss of a quarter of a million dollars. Or perhaps it was a faint, thin voice of conscience crying in the back of his mind. Suddenly, at any rate, the major could hear Ying's voice from that early afternoon.

"And through the hours of this day, may the demons of hell follow the untruths from your foul tongue."

Inexplicibly, a cold sweat broke out on the major's forehead. It was as if Ying's voice was audibly in the room with him, mocking him. He stood up.

"To hell with this," he muttered. "I'm not out those papers yet. They were saps enough to take 'em, and they'll be saps enough to give 'em back."

And then, in spite of himself, he heard Ying's voice in the back of his mind, speaking as it had that afternoon.

"May the Gods of Truth control your lies against you this day."

Truth and lies. Well this was one lie that turned to truth. He'd profi—Suddenly the major was stopped short by the glimmering of a wild, foolish idotic idea. But then his face twisted in cynical disdain.

"I can't let this momentary mess get me down," he muttered. "I've got work to do, and I'll have to do it fast."

GEORGE SCRAGG was in his dressing robe when the major pounded on the door of their suite. He was sleepy-eyed, and obviously startled at seeing the major.

"I must talk to you, old chap," the major greeted him. He had no trouble in making his voice sound agitated. Mr. Scragg nodded bewilderedly, pulling his robe about his paunch and directing his visitor to a chair.

The major shook his head.

"No, old boy, I prefer to stand if you don't mind." Nervously he lighted a cigarette.

George Scragg sat down perplexedly and waited for the major to explain his visit. The major gave an excellent imitation of honest-man-struggling-with-a guilty-conscience. He paced back and forth, puffing nervously on his cigarette.

"I can't do it, old fellow. I just can't," the major declared in mental anguish when he considered the silence tense enough.

George Scragg blinked his eyes.

"Do what?"

"Let you take those mining deeds," the major made himself blurt the words, like a man desperate and ashamed all at once.

"But the deal—" George Scragg began bewilderedly.

"The deal was a dirty, rotten, crooked

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mess!" The major managed to put tears into his voice now.

"Dirty? Rotten? Crook—" George Scragg faltered in confusion.

"Yes, I was going to make you and your wife the victims of the first wretched, stinking trick I've ever pulled in all my life!" The major sat down suddenly, burying his head in his hands. "You mean," said George Scragg, shocked, "those deeds are no good?"

"They are utterly worthless. The property they lease has been diamond-dead for over ten years," the major said chokingly.

"But my money," George Scragg was instantly on his feet, indignant. "What did you do with that check?"

"I've brought it with me, you can have it back!" The major rose and handed the check to Scragg. "Now give me those deeds, man, and let me leave before this damnable shame kills me."

But George Scragg, though slow about many things, was not quite so slow once he was forewarned that he was dealing with a man who had sharped him once.

"If those papers are worthless," he said suspiciously, "why do you want them back. I can just tear them up."

The major felt suddenly uncomfortable. He had underestimated George Scragg a little too heavily. But he had to stick to his role.

"My conscience wouldn't let me do it, wouldn't permit me to go through with the swindle," he said despairingly, switching to the groundwork of his approach. "You people were too decent. I tell you, I swear by the living gods that this is the first dishonest thought I'd ever entertained in my life!" The major was no slouch as a ham. His performance was more than slightly convincing to Scragg.

"Ma will be sorry to hear this," George Scragg said.

"I'VE been more or less out of my head for the past month, old boy," the major said emotionally, plunging onward. "I've not been well. In fact, well, the doctor's given me no time at all left in life. I'm liable to go any instant; my heart."

This struck deep in George Scragg.

"Why, gosh, yes," he agreed, "that would be enough to make anybody a little crazy now and then. I know it would me. Say, I'm terribly sorry," he concluded lamely.

If Major Marquand felt that he was digging deep into the tears and gush, the look on his audience's face was enough to convince him that it had been worth while.

"So I was really a little bit out of my head, old man, when I pulled that dirty trick on you two. The minute I regained the slightest normalcy, I regretted it."

"I think I understand, Major," George Scragg said sympathetically. "I had an aunt once who used to go temporarily off the handle when she had a severe mental strain. Don't worry, I'll say nothing of this to the Missus."

Major Marquand took Scragg's hand.

"Thanks, George old boy. You don't know what this has meant in torment and suffering for me. Have you got those worthless deeds?"

This time George Scragg handed across the papers without further urging. The major felt like yelling in triumphant glee as his fists closed about the deeds.

At the door George Scragg said:

"I'm grateful to you, Major, for your honesty. And you don't have to worry none about me telling a soul about your spells. And if you'd like, the Missus and I'll keep you company any time that you feel you might be dy—that is, feel as if dea—I mean—" Scragg floundered around in confusion.

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The major gripped his hand.

"I know what you mean, old boy. I appreciate it." He made his voice husky, and tried his best to look like a man who'd die at the drop of a pin. Then the major stepped down the hall and Scragg closed his door softly in the background.

Had Scragg seen Major Milo Marquand's face—wreathed in an exultantly avaricious grin—he would have scratched his thick head and wondered even further about his strange experiences with the cultured British ex-army officer.

BACK in his suite, Major Marquand closed and locked the door hurriedly, going immediately to his desk where he sat down and carefully examined the South African mining deeds. They were just the same as when he'd turned them over to the guileless Scraggs.

And now the major picked up the recently arrived special delivery message from his confidante Schwartz. It was a pleasure for him to sit down once more and go over it. He removed the note from the evelope.

"Mine holding report forgeries to arrive tomorrow. There will be the usual charge for services. Twenty-five bucks per deed. Good luck and good hunting.—Schwartz."

Major Marquand stared popeyed at the page. This was not the note Schwartz had originally written. It was totally different, quite completely in reverse to what he had stated then. Why, this note read as if the mines weren't worth a damn at all!

Quickly, the major began to riffle through his other papers. Six, seven times, he returned to the envelope, searching through its folds to find the original message from Schwartz. But there was no other message. Only this.

Marquand felt as if he were going mad.

A telephone call to Chicago got him Schwartz. Frantically, the major demanded to know about the mine, about the note.

"Are you crazy, Major?" Schwartz demanded. "There was only one note. That told you that the fees would be the same."

Marquand tried, almost screamingly, to explain to Schwartz what he meant. But the go-between finally cut him off.

"Go to bed and sleep through it. I've never known you to drink on the job before." Schwartz hung up on him.

And now, maddeningly, Ying's voice came back to Major Milo Marquand. And with it the incredibly insane suspicion he'd had momentarily a half-hour or so ago.

"May the Gods of Truth," he could hear Ying say, "control your lies against you this day."

And suddenly, for no reason that he was conscious of, the memory of the cable from the non-existent Maharajah returned to Major Marquand. And with it came the recollection of the cigarettes, inscribed for him, and which he hadn't ever ordered.

MAJOR MILO MARQUAND squeezed his hands so tightly that the nails bit into his flesh. His mind was an agony of torment.

"Damn!" Marquand said explosively, standing up from his desk. "It's ridiculous. It's preposterous. I refuse to believe it. That oriental hodge-podge!"

But there were the cable from the Indian potentate, the ultra-expensive cigarettes, and the first message from Schwartz. They all had one thing in common. They all followed a particular lie of Major Marquand.

The cablegram had made his lie about

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the Indian Maharajah a fact.

The cigarettes had turned his play for swank to cold truth.

Schwartz's first note had made true the lies about the mining holdings which he'd told to the Scraggs.

And now, as a sort of utterly staggering clincher, Major Milo Marquand realized one last fact. He had—knowing the mines to be valuable—rushed to Scragg and lied about their value, calling them worthless. Significantly, when he returned to his room, the mining deeds *were* worthless. His last lie had been made true!

Marquand threw his hands over his face, as if in an effort to shut out these conclusions, to drive away their maddening implications. But the pieces fitted far too well to be ignored. Ying had cursed him. Ying had cursed him so that the lies he told this day would be truths.

"May the Gods of Truth control your lies against you this day." The words came to Marquand again, in Ying's voice. But even as he fought them from his brain, he realized something else. The curse ended with: "this day."

Frantically, Marquand recalled the part in the rest of the curse. The part that said: "through the hours of this day." Now he was utterly convinced. The curse was for this day, for twenty-four hours. This day was not yet over. Marquand glanced swiftly at the clock on his desk. No, by God, this day wasn't through yet. It was but a quarter to midnight.

"There are fifteen minutes left to this day," Marquand said savagely to himself. "And in those fifteen minutes, Ying, I'll make a sucker of you and your oriental curse!"

"Lies," he went on. "My lies become truths, eh? Well what's to prevent me from getting down to the lobby and lying my damned head off. I can make those mines worth millions in fifteen minutes. All I need is someone to lie to." He was laughing now, shakily and a little wildly.

Major Milo Marquand's voice had been choked, and now he was breathing heavily through his nostrils, chest heaving. He started swiftly for the door of his suite. Started swiftly and stopped with sickening abruptness. A sudden, horrible wrenching tore his chest, his face going ghastly pale.

The major had his hand on his heart, slumping slightly forward, seeking the refuge of a chair. He felt an incredibly engulfing wave of weakness as he sank into the chair. He wanted to curse his luck as his eyes found the clock. But there was not enough strength left. He dared not move. The weakness was overpowering, the ache in his chest unbearable.

And as the major sat there helpless, in agony, his eyes fixed staringly on the clock that mocked him, he knew that Ying had gathered in all the aces. The major would never get downstairs before the day was over. The major would probably never get downstairs again.

Hideously, now, his own words were swimming before his pain-blurred eyes. The words that had been so glibly called upon to eucre Scragg out of the deeds.

"The doctor's given me no time at all left in life. I'm liable to go any instant; my heart."

Major Milo Marquand knew, as the weakness grew more and more engulfing, that Ying's curse had made that last lie of his, that final rotten falsehood, an inescapable fact. With his last remaining strength, Major Marquand held himself erect in his chair—contemplating the web that truth can weave.

THE END

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»»» Introducing ««« THE AUTHOR

JAY JACKSON
(Artist)

BIG Frank Jackson spread a wide and pearly grin. His broad hairy chest expanded another four or five inches and he stuck hard calloused thumbs under his armpits. He strode the splintered creaky boards across the kitchen to the clock hanging on the shamelessly nude cracked plaster wall over the water pail.

The clock had stopped at five minutes to twelve, but "What the hell!" he said, "who cares whether the kid was born on the tenth or eleventh of Septemper. It's here! it's a boy, and everything is fine. Hot damn!" The object of the old man's affection was me—and although I don't remember it, I've been told that I was lying in bed broadcasting my arrival to a sleepy, disinterested world in accents loud and clear.

My dad was pleased because the big bird with the long bill had short changed him with girls on three previous occasions, but this time, at long last, had come a man child to carry on the family name! And what a name—and what a boy!

This tender little scene took place in Oberlin, Ohio, some score and two thirds years ago . . . but time marches on, as we've heard tell, and the scene changes (for which you will no doubt be thankful). We find the hero (that's me) of this here yarn swinging a spike maul on a railroad track near Columbus, Ohio. The weather is hot—so is the boss, because yours truly wasn't so hot as a spike maul tosser, being only thirteen years old and a little light in the places and things necessary for heaving an eleven pound hammer ten hours a day.

So, down comes the curtain again, to rise on a steel mill scene in Pittsburgh, Pa. We find our slightly brawnier party of the first part with a pair of steel tongs in his leather-encased hands, grabbing at a hunk of white hot steel as it jumps out of the rollers. If he misses it, it won't miss him, and will cut through his legs like a hot knife through butter.

The next thrilling chapter follows in the gymnasium of Ohio Wesleyan University in Delaware, Ohio. This time my hands wear a pair of sweat and blood smeared mitts and above me stands a chunky little guy called Shorty Morrison. The referee calls a halt on this very touching murder—and it was strictly touching, too—Shorty touched me with everything but the ring posts. That wasn't my first fight, but (thank God) it was practically my last.

An English teacher told me I should be an advertising writer because on one historic afternoon, I described a fried egg in all its taste tantalizing glory—in such a realistic way that she swore she could smell it. One of my art teachers suggested that I quit school and keep the night job I had driving a mail truck, because I might be an artist some day, and I might not—but I could always drive a truck.

Well, I didn't take either teacher's advice . . . being only nineteen years old and knowing (I thought) what everything was all about, I said "I do" to the girl of my dreams and started in the sign business. Business was good—in fact it was super, and I had sign painted the whole countryside before a severe case of lead poisonnig put me out of the sign business and on the train to Chicago, where effortlessly I became first poster artist and then shop foreman for a chain of theaters.

Everything was swell until the old man with

(Concluded on page 142)

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READER'S PAGE

"FOUR STARS IN ANY LINGO"

Sirs:

I have just finished the September edition of F. A., and let me tell you, that was an ISSUE!! It was easily worth four stars in any man's lingo, and five stars in mine.

Gilford's novel, "The Liquid Man," was pretty near the best story I've read in a long time. Oscar, the Martian Detective, clicked like a ball leaving a bat for a home run! The only story I couldn't grasp was "Miracle At Dunkirk," but maybe I was sleepy. As for the other stories, orchids to all of them. Hold on to that new fella, Raphael! Wow, he's good!

Roger Sklar,
1950 Andrews Avenue,
The Bronx, N. Y.

Mighty strong praise, Roger, but lissen' to this! Here's a guy who disagrees.—Ed.

ANOTHER LINGO!

Sirs:

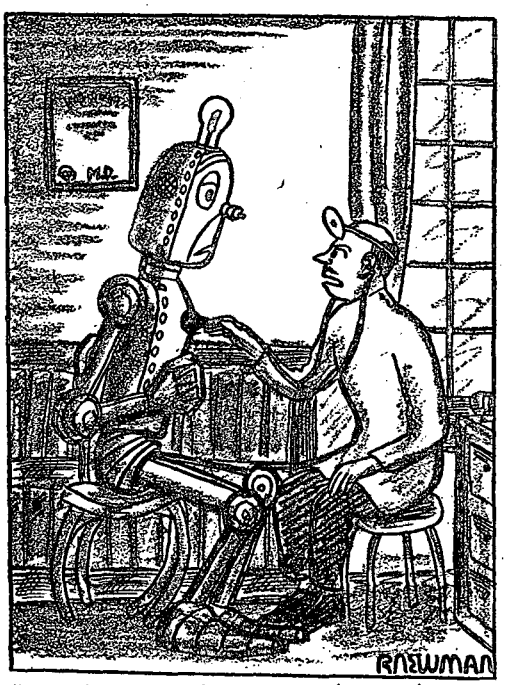
The September cover was really awful. I couldn't believe that it was done by the same Robert Fuqua who painted *Amazing Stories'* latest masterpiece.

"The Liquid Man" was . . . well, the less said the better. "Oscar's" latest story was nothing more than a western. And *did not* belong in F. A.

"Miracle At Dunkirk" was nifty and runs off with first place honors. The rest of the yarns were only so-so.

Vincent Scullin,
Hotel Traymore,
Atlantic City, N. J.

This seems to be 100% the other way. At least you two have something in common—you don't like anything the other likes, and vice-versa!—Ed.



"According to my diagnosis, you have a short circuit in the condenser; three burnt out filaments, and a dead fuse."

CALLING ALL WILD ELEPHANTS!

Sirs:

I have been an enthusiastic reader of A. S. and F. A. since December and I think they are the best printed. This is the first time I have put in my say, and I want to tell you a few things.

First, I may be one in a million, but I hate trimmed edges and slick pages!

Second, people who write in saying they hate Burroughs (my favorite author) should be trampled to death by wild elephants.

Third, A. S. and F. A. improve with every issue.

"The Return of Circe" was a great story. I hope to see another like it soon.

Harmon Craig,
1323 N. Emporia,
Wichita, Kansas.

No, you aren't one in a million. You are in quite a large company. Although all are not as drastic as you, regarding people who don't like Burroughs!—Ed.

HE READS 'EM ALL!

Sirs:

Looking through my pile of magazines, I find that I have thirteen current issues of both S. F. and Fantasy publications. I buy every mag I see that even hints of S. F. or Fantasy. I can truthfully say that *Fantastic Adventures* and *Amazing Stories* top the list.

I rate "The Return of Circe," "Mr. Murchison's Ghost," and "Ebbtide Jones' Atom Constrictor" best in August.

Give us back our "Mac" on the covers. Ruth is good, but cannot compare with McCauley. Magarian is okay.

Wm. J. Hartwick,
420 Cedar Street,
Wallace, Idaho.

Ever since we published a letter which listed us at the bottom of the list, we've been deluged by letters from readers who have come to our defense

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and we're gratified to find we have so many friends, and so energetic about refuting that "rating." We'd blush to print some of the "hot" letters we've gotten. Your letter impresses us, because you certainly read enough magazines to know what you are talking about.—Ed.

LIKES—DISLIKES—OTHER THINGS

Sirs:

Dislikes—Lousy titles, McGivern's and O'Brien's humor, Fuqua on the cover, Robert Moore Williams.

Likes—Anniversary issues, Magarian, stories (most of 'em), O'Brien's shorts (and I don't mean his pants), departments, sarcastic letters in Reader's Page.

Speaking of O'Brien and McGivern, they have L. A. and even their best friends won't tell them. (L. A.—Lousy Authors.) However, there *were* some of their stuff that I liked. "The Strange Voyage of Hector Squinch" and "The Visible Invisible Man" were *good.* It's just now and then that they hit the bottom with that infernal Mortimer Meek, Merton Muddle, and Quintus Quaggle Ickeygoo.

About Sir Fuqua now. Why can't you put someone who can draw on the cover? Like Magarian—he's hot stuff! Or McCauley.

Oh, yes, Robert Moore Williams. We're feuding just now, he and I. Only it's rather one-sided feud, 'cause he doesn't know anything about it. But the first time I read him, till now, I still think "he ought to be dead."

Where in #$%#$%& is Nelson S. Bond?

M. A. Chamberlin,
17641 Larchwood Avenue,
Cleveland, Ohio.

Let's run a little contest, just between you and the editors. No prizes. You retitle all of our stories each month, the way you think they ought to be, and let us know what they are. Fair enough? Your reward just might *be seeing one of those titles on a future story. W. T. S. (we take suggestions.)*

Come on, you L. A. authors—what about that humor business? Get funny, boys. Lots funnier!

What about McCauley? Don't *we have him on the cover? Migosh, how can you miss those "Mac" girls?*

Williams is pretty popular with the majority.

Bond? Well, he'll be back. He's on our desk quite frequently, but he's run into that old bugaboo, "a similar story already in the house."—Ed.

PROBLEM STORY

Sirs:

I have the perfect solution for the problem story: Have the Martian flip a coin with heads on both sides—if it lands tails, he'll push the left button—if it lands heads he'll push the right button. Simple, isn't it?

Wallace E. Buchholz,
330 Spaulding Avenue,
Ripon, Wisconsin.

Your solution is more logical than some!—Ed.

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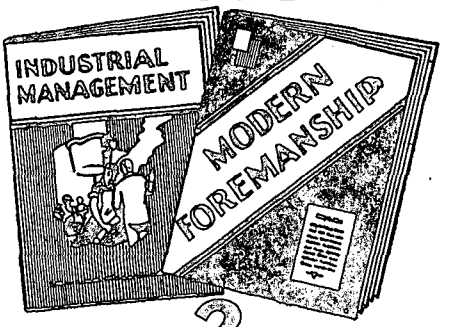

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INTRODUCING THE AUTHOR

(Concluded from page 139)

the scythe caught up with my life and struck swiftly, viciously—my father, my first child—my wife . . . leaving me with an infant daughter and not the vaguest idea how to fold a diaper. I was twenty-two.

The next scene comes on like an Orson Welles film set—crazy pictures at crazy angles . . . loneliness, bitterness, sullenness, strange hotels and soulless rooms, moonshine whiskey, bathtub gin, despair. . . .

Life had done me dirt and I resented it . . . so I drew and wrote about people on the down beat—my inborn humor turned sour and came out on paper with a sardonic grin. I tossed them in a trunk and forgot them. As the years crawled by, bitterness and frustration hung around me like a shadow . . . but I was lucky too, for those were the years when hand painted posters we used in front of theaters and speakeasies went in for murals . . . more work than I could handle was tossed my way. Then, after those years of wild prosperity came 1933. No job. I gave up my apartment and moved into a fine hotel . . . kept my big flashy convertible gleaming . . . changed suits every day—it seems crazy now, but at that time, it helped to keep my courage up.

Working on Old Mexico murals for the Century of Progress, I dug into my trunk and submitted a number of illustrated verses to a Pittsburgh newspaper on which I had worked while still in school. The drawings caught on, and I soon had a staff job on a Chicago magazine and national weekly newspaper, also a three year contract from a New York publisher to fill up a half page each week in his magazine section.

Then (in the Chicago office) I met the little lady who was destined to be my girl Friday, my good right arm and the rarely silent power behind the throne.

So, everything is all right now . . . I have my studio in our little suburban home, where my wife pinch hits at modeling for me, in between her own enthusiasm for dress design and the business of raising my daughter who graduated from the eighth grade this past June. I want to tell you how much I enjoy working for this fine magazine, and how much I appreciate your grand letters—even the ones telling me how lousy I am—because they all keep me trying harder to make each drawing better than the last, and some day, I hope to please all of you.—*Jay Jackson.*

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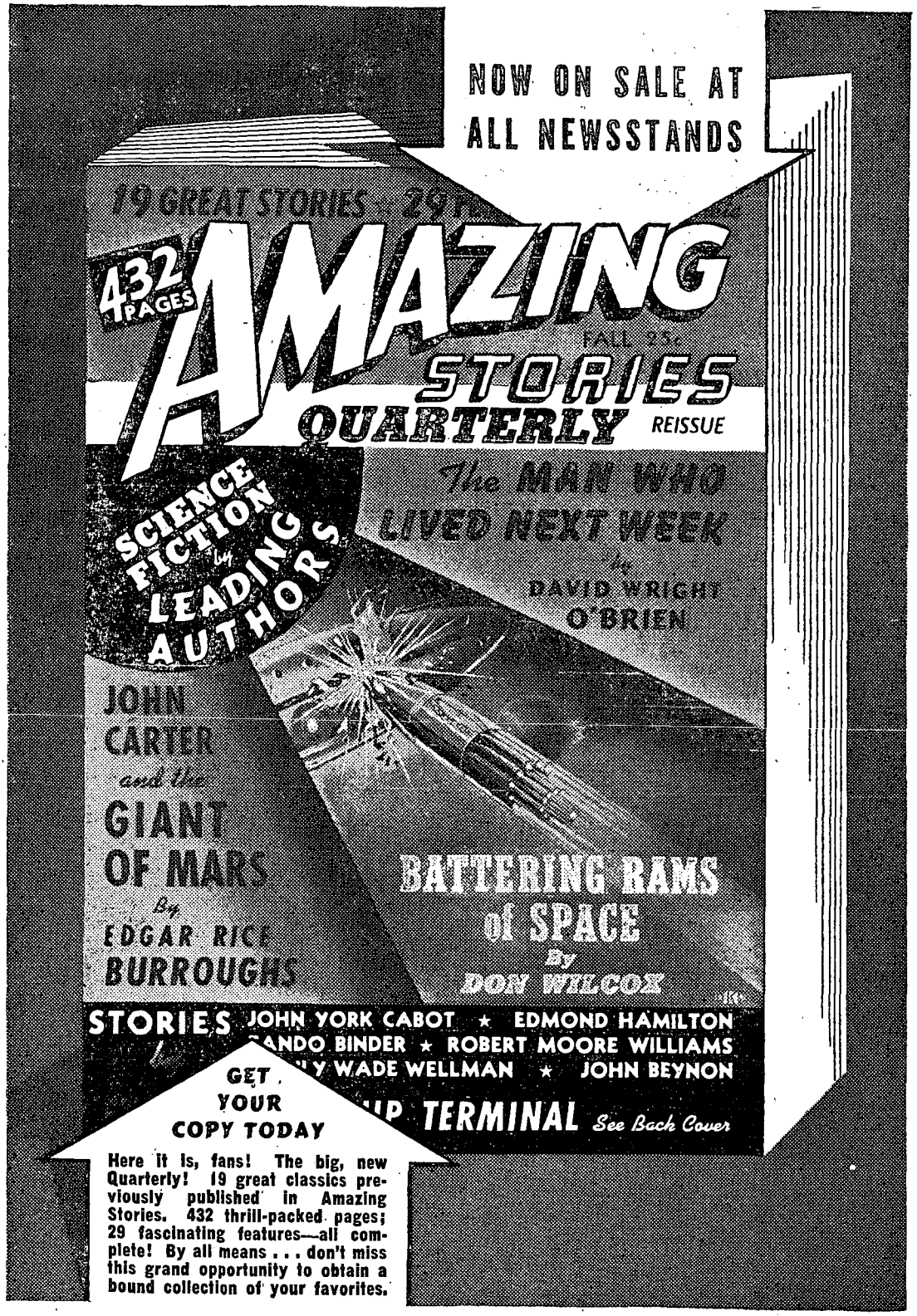

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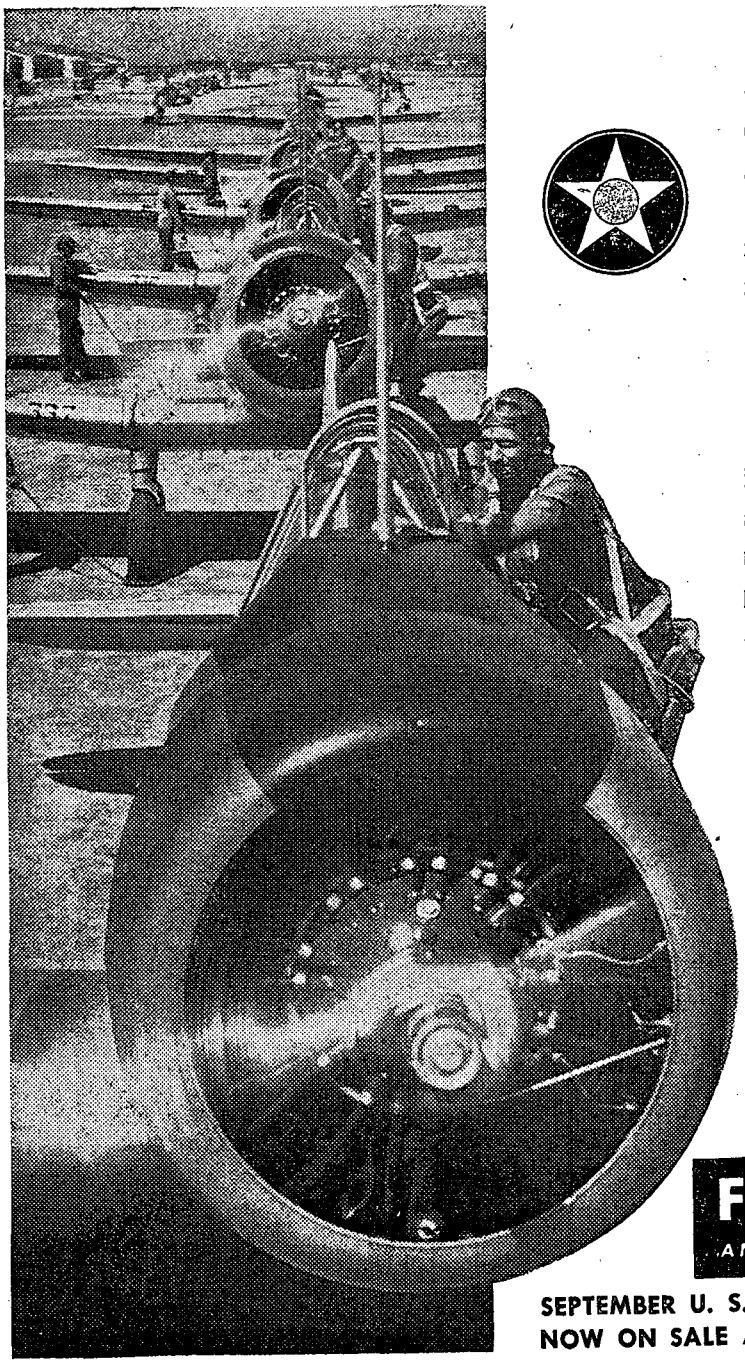

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29x5.25-19	2.45	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.50	1.15
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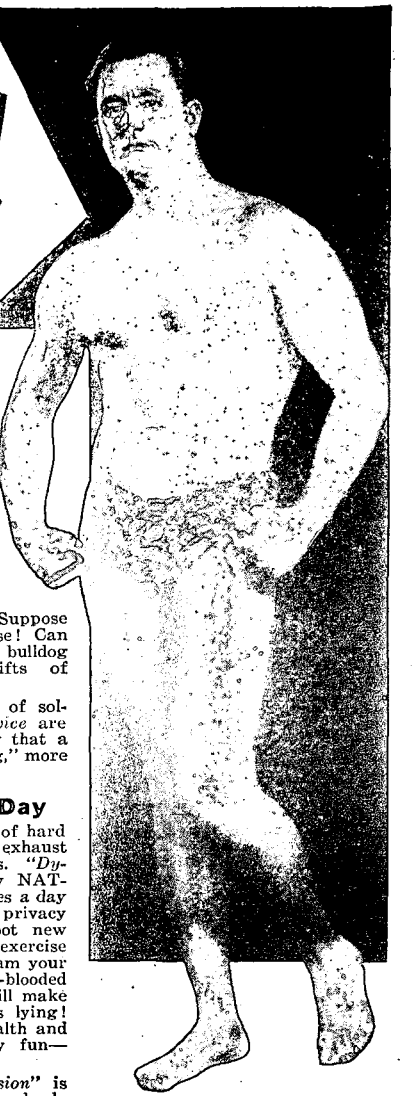

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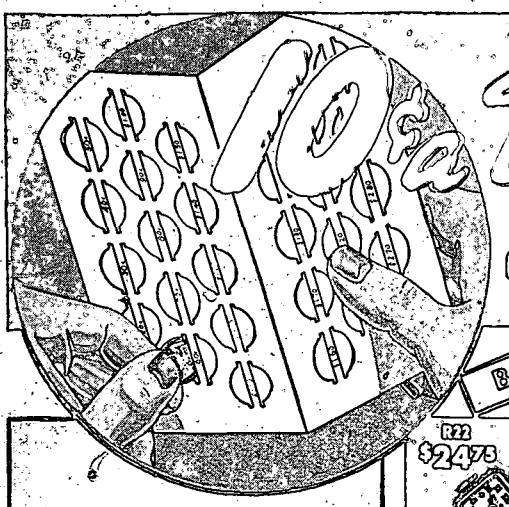

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on Our SAVINGS BOOK PLAN

BULOVA · ELGIN · GRUEN · KENT · BENRUS

Yes—only 10c a day on my SAVINGS BOOK PLAN will buy your choice of these nationally known watches. It's simple—here's how you go about it...

WHAT YOU DO:

Send coupon below with a dollar bill and a brief note telling me who you are, your occupation, and a few other facts about yourself. Indicate the watch you want on coupon, giving number and price.

WHAT I'LL DO:

I'll open an account for you on my SAVINGS BOOK PLAN, send the watch you want for approval and

10-DAY TRIAL

If satisfied, you pay 10 monthly payments. If you are not satisfied after wearing the watch for ten days, send it back and I'll return your dollar on our

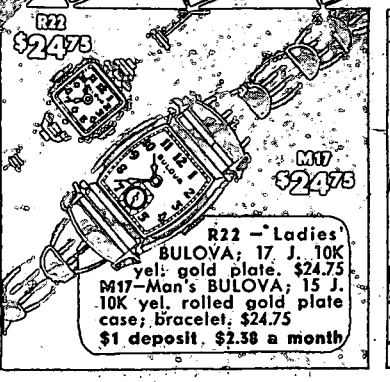
MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE

A Savings Book will be sent to you to help you save your dime each day. YOU PAY MONTHLY by money order or check. Try this easy, convenient method that has helped thousands to own fine watches without burden on the pocket book or savings.

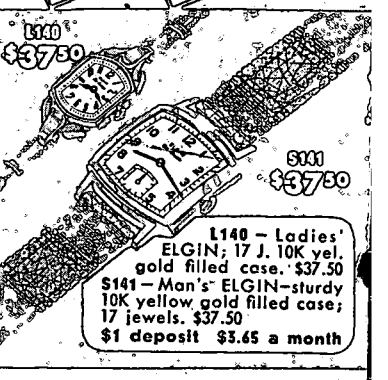
Jim Feeney

FREE TO ADULTS

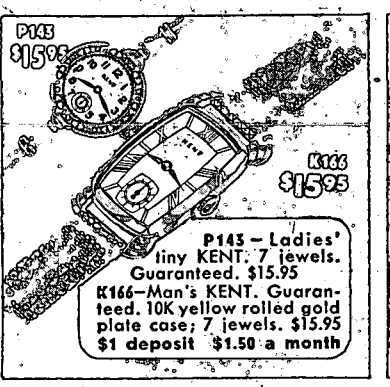
A postcard brings my complete 48-page catalogue and full details on my SAVINGS BOOK PLAN. No obligation.



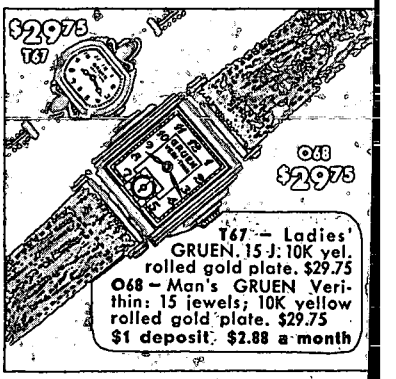
R22 — Ladies' BULOVA; 17 J. 10K yel. gold plate. $24.75
M17—Man's BULOVA; 15 J. 10K yel. rolled gold plate case; bracelet. $24.75
$1 deposit $2.38 a month



L140 — Ladies' ELGIN; 17 J. 10K yel. gold filled case. $37.50
S141 — Man's ELGIN—sturdy 10K yellow gold filled case; 17 jewels. $37.50
$1 deposit $3.65 a month

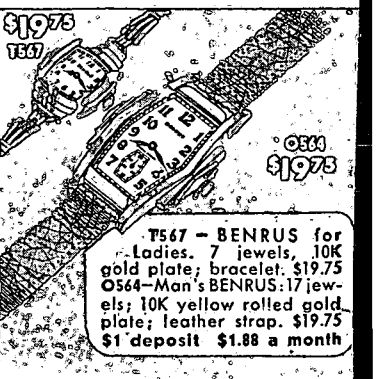


P143 — Ladies' tiny KENT. 7 jewels. Guaranteed. $15.95
K166—Man's KENT. Guaranteed. 10K yellow rolled gold plate case; 7 jewels. $15.95
$1 deposit $1.50 a month



T67 — Ladies' GRUEN. 15 J. 10K yel. rolled gold plate. $29.75
O68 — Man's GRUEN Verithin: 15 jewels; 10K yellow rolled gold plate. $29.75
$1 deposit $2.88 a month

K275 — Service Watch — new radium dial, easy-to-see. 7 Jewels, sturdy 10K yellow rolled gold plate case. Made especially for Army and Navy men.
$1 deposit $1.98 a month



T567 — BENRUS for Ladies. 7 jewels, 10K gold plate; bracelet. $19.75
O564—Man's BENRUS: 17 jewels; 10K yellow rolled gold plate; leather strap. $19.75
$1 deposit $1.88 a month

JIM FEENEY
L. W. Sweet—Dept. 761-J. 1670 Broadway
New York, N. Y.

Enclosed find $1 deposit. Send me Watch No. _____ Price $_____. I agree to wear the watch for 10 days. If not satisfied, I'll return it and you will refund my dollar. If I keep it, I'll pay balance in 10 equal monthly payments.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____

L. W. Sweet

MAIL ORDER DIVISION OF FINLAY STRAUS, Inc.
Dept. 761-J 1670 BROADWAY, NEW YORK

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